

Pen-Pals

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/58725955) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/58725955>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter , Matthew Brown/Will Graham
Characters:	Will Graham , Hannibal Lecter , Alana Bloom , Beverly Katz , Jack Crawford , Bella Crawford , Matthew Brown (Hannibal)
Additional Tags:	Pen Pals , Letters , Slow Burn , Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Omega Will Graham , Alpha Hannibal Lecter , Mating Cycles/In Heat , Angst , Explicit Sexual Content , Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault , Dubious Consent , Ambiguous/Open Ending , Drama , don't come here looking for a happy ending , Murder , the will and matthew tag is very briefly explored
Language:	English
Collections:	Omega Will Festival — 2024
Stats:	Published: 2024-10-29 Words: 37,910 Chapters: 4/4

Pen-Pals

by [adam_rover](#)

Summary

For more than twenty years, Will Graham has secretly been pen-pals with Hannibal Lecter, a sophisticated Alpha from across the world. What began as an innocent letter exchange program quickly grew into a lifeline for the Omega. Through Hannibal's promises of grandeur and glamour, Will dreams of a life far beyond his reach. Hannibal is his little secret, and Will is unwilling to give him away, even when he eventually stops writing to him and tries to forget it all.

Some secrets, once faced, can never be erased.

This is a story of the intoxicating allure of an imagined life, and the consequences that come from it.

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From the prompt "Lady Murasaki signed a young alpha Hannibal up for a penpal internationally in the hopes he could find a replacement for his hatred and save his soul. Newly presented omega Will is forced to participate for school. His letter finds Hannibal." for the omega will festival <3 I tweaked the prompt a little bit to fit my agenda, please forgive me.

Secret

Chapter Notes

Will Graham has built a life for himself at the police academy in Quantico, and has spent months and years attempting to forget the pen-pal he more or less ghosted.

Hannibal Lecter has other ideas.

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Please let me know if I've missed any tags throughout the work, it was not my intention and I will edit it immediately :)

To Hannibal Lecter: 22 June 19XX

Dear Hannibal,

I hope you're doing well!

I wanted to thank you for your latest book recommendation. I was able to go down to the library last week after school, and was glad to find they had two copies. Not in the original Italian, as you may guess. And thank God for it, too, otherwise I would not have enjoyed it as much as I did, being able to understand it.

I keep looking at the card you sent me from the museum, 'Dante et Virgille en Enfer', if you remember, of the two of them locked into an eternal fight in Hell. I have it tucked in my notebook, I always find myself coming back to it. It flatters me to share a name with the artist who made it. And of course it flatters me infinitely more to know you thought of me when you found it.

I started my new job today. It's just at the supermarket down the street. The lady who owns the shop keeps smiling at me. She coddles me a bit too much, but I can't really complain, it's one of those moments when I'm grateful for the stereotypes of my biology. Though I admit I can't help but get flustered every time she calls me pretty. I feel like a little girl.

At the moment I'm only helping around with shelving, but next week they told me I can man the till. I'm excited to finally make some real money and help Dad out. All the jobs I had before were just carrying and passing things for the fishermen at our previous town, and they would just pass me a few bucks or a beer for my dad. This one will be different. Aurora says she won't be caught dead paying me with alcohol. It warms my heart to hear it, oddly enough. Such a silly thing.

It boggles my mind to think how fast the years have flown. It's been nearly three years since your first letter to me. I can hardly remember what my response was, but given we are still here, writing to each other, it must have been good enough.

How's your summer panning out to be? Did you enjoy the Alps in April? I never asked. I'm still waiting for a picture of you wearing a ski mask. You better include that in your next letter, so I can laugh at you accordingly.

Yours,

Will

To Will Graham: July 7th, 19XX

Dear Will,

I am delighted at your positive response to Inferno. It is truly a one of a kind masterpiece, and I would give anything to have you enjoy it in its original print. Perhaps you would let me read it to you one day, and translate it to you sentence by sentence. It would please me immensely to do so.

Allow me to correct a statement of yours regarding Dante and Virgil in Bouguereau's painting. If you take a closer look at the card, you will see two men in the background, behind the men enclosed in the eternal embrace of battle. Those shadowed men are Dante and Virgil themselves. The men in the front are Capocchio and Ghianni Schicchi, two inhabitants of the underworld, giving Dante and Virgil a glimpse into a hell they've only seen in writing.

The painting itself is a beautifully structured piece, one that offers so many different perspectives that you may grow dizzy just by looking at it for a second too long. So curious that the men who are mentioned in the title are reduced to almost the same level as ourselves - the audience. Yet the main heroes of the painting remain unnamed in its title. These two men in hell, locked in a painting, stripped of a story, stripped of a name, yet so undeniably beautiful.

William Bouguereau made this painting to essentially boast about his incredible skill in human anatomy. It was an ode to himself as an artist. And incredibly enough, at the time it was not as strongly recognised as it is today.

I dearly wish I could show you all of Paris, Will. You would adore it, and I would adore your presence beside me.

I wish you all the best with your work at the supermarket. I already have Aurora in my good graces, considering the compliments she is paying you. Were I in her position, I

would have undeniably done the same. If only to watch you pink in embarrassment.

Unfortunately I do not have a ski mask photograph for you, but I can assure you my trip was delightful, albeit lonesome. My family was not able to join me, but I made a few acquaintances on my trip. I will shamefully admit I spent the majority of it hunched over papers. I accidentally brought my studies to my holiday, but I am grateful for doing so. It elevated some of that weight from my shoulders.

I thank you nonetheless for asking after my enjoyment from my trip. Perhaps the Alps are yet another destination you would like to see someday. Just say the word, and I shall add it to our ever-growing list.

My summer is panning out to be quite delightful, though I am similarly spending most of it indoors. There is hardly anything preferable to my studies at this current moment in time, and I find myself immersed in them, with only your stories and responses to distract me. I must insist you keep writing, lest the fate of a shut-in scholar befalls me.

My aunt has been eerily absent as of late, I begin to think she avoids my presence, and my uncle is just as absent as he always is. It is humorous that I get more letters from you, who live a whole lifetime away, when they live in the same city.

Enjoy your summer, my dear Will, and try not to overwork yourself.

Yours,

Hannibal

Will Graham had a secret since he was thirteen years old, one that began as an innocent letter from a program his neighbour's daughter had signed them both into. His secret was an Alpha from another continent. The secret's name was Hannibal Lecter.

They had turned it into a little game, over the years. For Will at least, it had always been a little game. The promises of all the capital cities, of the countryside, of streets he could not pronounce, of mountain ranges and beaches and rivers and seas. The rich promises of a rich Alpha who thought nothing of them, yet for a poor Omega it was a colourful dream, one he would play on repeat and project onto the dark, spotty ceiling of his room when all the lights were off. He would replace the damp, sickly sweet scent of whiskey with the burning candles of cathedrals, the glow of the tiny TV with sun rays through stained glass, the rumbling of his father's coughs with the honeyed voices of opera singers. Will Graham was rich in those moments, he was rich when he wrote to his friend, and he was rich when he read his responses. Not in the materialistic sense, though that was always a nice thought in itself. He

was rich in memories he created through his imagination, and through Hannibal's promises. And those promises never ceased to come, much like Hannibal's flirtations.

Both of which Will purposefully ignored and refused to entertain, except in the quiet moments, in the depths of his mind. He knew enough of Hannibal to know their purpose. It was part teasing, and part doing it because he could and wanted to. Hannibal loved to pour praises and promises into his words, because it gave him more power over people. A power only a member of high society knew how to truly wield. It was not a conscious effort, at least not so early in his age, but it was one borne of necessity to control the conversation. To control the world. Will ignored it, because he knew himself, and he knew just how easily he would let himself be controlled. Most of all, he ignored it because he simply didn't want it to stop.

With the letters tucked away safely, and the pen a long distance from his fingers, he let his imagination run wild. And in these moments he walked along the streets of Paris, along the halls of Musée d'Orsay, hand tucked in the crook of an Alpha's elbow, the image of a life amongst the elites washing his reality away in a warm wave of artificial contentment.

Will Graham could never give away his secret. And he could never face it, too, he realised some years later. The moment he faced it, he knew it would all end. It would be like Dante gazing upon the two men, faced with the reality of a hell he'd only read about, of the destructive beauty of it. The moment he faced it, Will would be destroyed.

[Paris, 19XX]

Lady Murasaki had grown used to her authority in the household, over the years. She'd begun her life in this family expecting a more subdued role, charmed by the authority of her husband Robert, and coaxed into seeking such a dynamic from her own mother, an Omega, who had never known or been taught of the values to instil in an Alpha daughter.

Robert Lecter, however, was anything but authoritative, his deceptively dominant air merely brought upon by his cultural upbringing, which barred him from showing emotion on his face, or in his words. Robert was a gentle soul at heart, but that heart was expertly hidden, belonging only in the hands of his wife, who brought it out in him behind closed doors. To the rest of the world, Robert Lecter was a cold, stone-faced beta, who grew up in the shadow of his now deceased Alpha brother.

So when said brother's son turned up, traumatised beyond redeeming his humanity, found by pure fate from a family acquaintance at an orphanage near Vilnius, it was Murasaki who took his recovery to heart. She became so engrossed in the task of *fixing* her nephew, that she had not noticed the growing obsession he began to feel with her.

The boy would go everywhere with her, would only feel calm enough in her presence to eat, and only looked at her. Murasaki felt pity for him, but equally, she felt terror. She had not meant to foster this dependency, and she had no idea how to get rid of it without breaking the boy's soul. Robert remained none-the-wiser, absent as he was from the house and its

dealings. Soon, she also began to notice other concerning things about the boy. His eyes were too cold, his movements too rehearsed, he did not look like a child in her eyes, rather he looked like a supernatural being, following her every move and haunting her. She began to fear her own perception of her nephew, and attempted to avoid him. She would hear things whispered from the staff around the house, about Hannibal, about something he had done outside near the river, that made the gardener's hairs stand up. Whenever she would be alone with the boy in a room, she would count the seconds and wait for things to go wrong.

Eventually, Murasaki felt brave enough to bring this up with a friend of hers, desperate to find a solution and distract her nephew from herself. In turn, the friend recommended a program. A letter exchanging program, Murasaki was told, designed to bring people together from all kinds of backgrounds with all kinds of purposes. Intrigued, Murasaki went with said friend to an office downtown, where she was given a list of names, handpicked to match her nephew's description and needs. She took the list home, and looked for Hannibal.

"For practice," she said when she eventually found him, thrusting the leaflet and the list into her nephew's view. "I believe you will find it much easier to communicate with someone who knows nothing of who you are, and what you have been through. There will be no real consequence of whatever you say to them, so you may find some peace in that."

She felt a chill running down her spine at the words she uttered, at the feeling of dooming another child so far from herself to the whims of a nephew who needed help she had no capacity to provide. Though it quickly dissolved, as she convinced herself it was a good deed, one that would bring two lonely souls together, rather than doom them to a dark and painful lifetime.

Hannibal looked at the folded list, tucked into his slightly chilly hands. They were perpetually cold, despite the stretching summer; it was as if that winter in Lithuania never quite left his body, as well as his mind. He unfolded the list, skimming through the names, and cast a questioning glance in Murasaki's direction.

"They are all similar ages to you, I thought it would be best," explained his aunt. "Nobody from France, or from your home country. Strangers in every aspect."

Hannibal could not understand her insistence on participating in whatever this is, or her constant reminders that it was *of no consequence*. Strangely enough, however, it seemed to work. He felt no pressure looking at the names, and let his eyes wander freely, knowing he had to pick one, if he wanted his aunt to leave him alone. It felt like picking a new toy, or a new hobby to spend his afternoons on. One name caught his eye, because the owner of it was the furthest distance from him. Scribbled next to it was *12, Omega, New Orleans, USA*. He put his finger under it, and turned the paper back to Murasaki.

"Will Graham," she read aloud. "Just two years younger than you, he's quite far. An Omega, too." She smiled fondly, thinking of the only Omega she knew and loved in her life - her own mother. "Thank you for indulging me, Hannibal. I will take the list back and sign you up. We shall send your letter away in a week. I will find a translator for you when the time comes."

When she left the room, Hannibal felt an odd spark of satisfaction. There was hardly any excitement, but there was a feeling of anticipation. Curiosity. He repeated the name of his

future correspondent in his head, trying to figure out the correct pronunciation. He would have to learn English, perhaps, depending on how it all went.

The young Alpha's mind began filling itself with ideas, future plans and schemes, and without even noticing, for the first time since it happened, he did not think either of his aunt, or of his baby sister's teeth.

[August 30, 19XX]

To Will Graham,

It is nice to meet you, my name is Hannibal Lecter, as you have probably discerned from the documents already presented to you.

I must confess, I am not sure how to begin our correspondence. I will start with a better introduction.

I have just begun my studies at a boarding school in Paris, and in future I wish to study medicine in Italy, preferably at the university in Florence. I am an Alpha, as my documents have suggested, though I do not seek my personality or aspiration in my secondary gender. I sincerely hope you do not, either.

Things that bring me pleasure are reading, sketching and, recently, the culinary arts. I have cooked for my family on occasion, and they have enjoyed it a lot. Do you like to cook, Will Graham? I am curious about your interests; I hope we can find common ground. Our conversations will be rather dull otherwise.

I am taking private lessons on the side in English, as I wish to soon begin writing without the need of a translator. My current translator is also my tutor, who is very patient with me.

I will be patiently awaiting your response. I wish you well, and hope you are having a pleasant autumn.

Kindest regards,

Hannibal Lecter

[September 10, 19XX]

Dear Hannibal,

Nice to meet you! Just Will is fine, by the way, no need to write my full name.

I'm glad you can ignore being an Alpha. I am not so lucky. As much as I want to be defined by everything else that I am, the world does not make it so easy.

I enjoy reading, too! We have a big library downtown, my dad's friends with the owners. They let me hang out there on evenings when it's closed. Do you read in French only? I've recently discovered Camus (in English, though. My Creole is alright, but not good enough for reading), my father says his work is too depressing for a newly presented teenager. Officially a teenager, now, I turned thirteen this year! Dad expects me to read the rhyme books with pictures, as if I'm still five. Did you know Camus was an Omega, too? I didn't! It makes me feel a little closer to him, for some reason. Maybe because he knew what life is like for someone like me.

I'm not very good at cooking, but I make my own breakfast! My dad's never really awake in the morning to make it for me. He buys us dinner, though, we eat fish a lot.

I can't say I know anything about art, but Ms Rosa from the library taught me how to sketch horses. I'll show you here, on the page.

I wonder, what kind of things do you sketch? It would be fun to see some of it.

Do you have a favourite author? I would like to read something of theirs. I hope you like Camus, too!

Kindest regards,

Will

Hannibal folded Will Graham's letter so only the wonky horse sketch showed, and set it aside on the little desk in his dorm room. He wasn't sure if he should keep it, or throw it away.

There was the faint scent of the Omega's fingertips, where they had touched and held the page.

He framed it.

[October 5th]

Dear Will Gr

Thank you for the horse. It's impressive for someone who claims not to have any talent in drawing. I admit, I much prefer sketching architecture and landscapes, though I, too, have found myself sketching animals from the countryside. I will draw you a horse, as well, to match your creation. I hope you enjoy mine as much as I did yours.

[]

[October 27th]

Dear Hannibal

You did that on purpose. it's not funny, by the way. I can't even remember what my horse drawing looked like, but now I regret doing it. It's not fair.

I'll try not to be bitter about your talent. It's really beautiful, Hannibal. I showed it to my dad and he wanted to pin it to the wall. We taped it to the fridge, because our current landlord won't allow nails in the walls.

I have been brushing up on my French with some of the neighbours, so you may see a phrase or two here and there. And don't worry about your English, it's really nice of you to try and learn it in the first place! It makes me feel special.

[]

Will noticed he began feeling excitement whenever he saw the postman walk by their house. That same excitement grew into euphoria when the man would open their mailbox and put something inside. It wasn't always a letter from Hannibal, of course, but when it was, Will would tuck away all his remaining plans for the day, and hole himself up in his room to read it and think of his reply.

Hannibal had recommended Ovid to him, and had promised to read Camus' work so they could talk more about it. Ms Rosa was apparently familiar with Ovid, too, and she gave Will her personal copy of *Metamorphosis* when the boy asked after the author.

He would see the drawing every day, whenever he was preparing a meal. The food started tasting better. His father liked the horse too, and would remark on it often. He was proud of Will for making a new friend from so far away.

The winter break came and went, but their letters remained consistent. What started as a compulsory task given to Hannibal by an aunt who was afraid of his psychology, now became an almost therapeutic pastime for the boy.

When Hannibal went home for the holidays, he talked to his family for the first time. Murasaki had teared up, and Robertus had smiled, a rare feat in itself. Peace was returning to the Lecter household, the whispers of the staff becoming quieter and quieter. Though the loudest ones disappeared, one after the other, each leaving a letter they needed to move out of the country.

The two boys almost always wrote about books in their letters. Occasionally, too, Hannibal shared recipes he'd learned, and Will talked about the fish he'd caught all on his own. The horse sketch became a sort of an inside joke: Will would doodle a horse on almost every letter he sent, and Hannibal, in turn, started taking walks to a farm near his dorms, and spent the entire day sketching the horses there, sometimes along with the scenery, on little pieces of paper, which he would slip into the envelope.

The Grahams' fridge soon became covered in horses.

Eventually, Will's doodles changed. He began to scribble flowers on the corners of the pages, while he thought of what to write. Hannibal took that as a challenge, and sent him intricate drawings of bouquets he would see around his uncle's house when he went back for holidays.

The fridge was full, so Will started taping them to his closet doors. Then his desk.

Then the flowers changed to cats, then dogs, then fish. Hannibal would draw every single one of them, in great detail, led by whatever doodle Will had mindlessly scratched onto the page with his pen. Soon, Will could not tape them around his room anymore, so he began putting them all in a big empty notebook, along with Hannibal's letters. It became the *Hannibal Notebook*. He wrote Hannibal's name on the cover with a white marker.

A week before Will's graduation day, Hannibal sent him a charcoal self-portrait. Will looked at it for half an hour in stunned silence, before he could even begin to read the letter.

[May 25]

Dear Will,

It dawned upon me that we have never seen each other's faces. In any other circumstance, I would have been bothered by this long before today, but it oddly never crossed my mind.

It is a big day for you, soon. Knowing all the hard work you've put in your AP classes and college preparations, I wanted to give you my heartfelt congratulations. I wish I could be there in person to support you for your achievements. I considered this the next best thing.

I hope my features are acceptable to your taste, Mr (soon-to-be Officer) Graham

Eventually, Will broke into a fitful laughter, dampened by the mirth that bloomed in his chest. He wasn't aware he was doing it, but next thing he knew, he was caressing the charcoal cheek so tenderly, he accidentally smudged it. He couldn't bring himself to feel bad. How could he stop himself?

Hannibal was so beautiful, thought Will. His eyes held the self-assuredness that could be read in the words of his letters; his cheekbones held the aristocracy Will was aware he was born into. In many ways, he was just as Will had imagined. And in others, he was completely different.

The portrait was small enough to fit into a round frame with the size of Will's palm, he just had to cut the edges. He put it on his windowsill.

At his graduation ceremony, he asked a teacher to take a picture of him. Everyone around him seemed surprised. He took a picture of the two dogs they had at home, Randy and Nelson, and drove to town to get them printed.

Looking at Will's pictures, accompanied by his heartfelt letter, Hannibal felt a smile growing onto his face. It was such an unfamiliar thing. His muscles were not relying on memory, but instinct alone, and it made it all the harder to ignore when it happened.

Will Graham was so beautiful, thought Hannibal. There was love growing in his heart for his pen-pal and close friend, one that made him question his whole being.

He would not admit it to Murasaki, but her plan had worked. None of Hannibal's attention was focused on her anymore. Though his other proclivities remained. They were just much more hidden than before.

He did not live with his family anymore. He had moved to Florence last year, eager to begin his studies. Even more eager to explore his interests. he'd instructed Will to wait for his next letter before writing, because his address would change. They'd done the same repertoire a few times before, on Will's side. He never stayed in the same place for too long.

Despite it only being a year, he'd felt himself growing into his own skin, becoming who he always was. There was a lot he hid from the letters, a lot he would never admit to his dear friend.

He framed the picture of Will in a beautiful murano glass frame, and put it on his desk, right next to the old horse scribble from three years ago.

[January 5nd 200X]

Dear Hannibal,

Happy New Year!

Despite the ten years I've known you and written to you, I'm somehow always late with the holiday wishes. Here I am!

How are you? I know it's been a while since I last wrote. Your last letter got lost for a long time, I was starting to worry you'd forgotten about me. When it arrived, it was covered in stamps! There was one from Singapore, I'm curious how that even happened.

I guess it's an elephant in the proverbial room, so I'll just say it. I quit the force two months ago. Stabbed on duty. Nothing crazy, before you freak out. I was negligent. You can say I learned my lesson. On my last day I was hollered at by a couple of fellow officers. Most of what they said is exactly what you would expect to be said to an Omega cop. Seems like Alpha society hasn't changed much.

I hope Florence is treating you well, as always. Any new artists you're obsessing over, or is it still good old Botticelli?

I've decided to give education another shot, I talked to Dad the other day about it. Might apply to a course in Entomology. There was a murder two years ago that was never solved, and back then I had a theory about the insects in the corpse, which I didn't have the knowledge to prove. I may have gotten a little too fixated.

I have to wait a while before I do anything, though. A nurse gave me shit for overworking my injured arm, so I have been kindly asked to rest for the next month or so. I'll keep you updated.

I guess that means you can't address me as Officer Graham anymore, as you so love to.

"I can't believe you actually showed up," Bev's voice betrayed just how surprised she truly was. Will never showed up to the social events, not unless they were included in his paycheck.

"I can't say I'm surprised *you're* here," Will quipped playfully, earning a playful shove from the Alpha. "Wonder if the food will be good, at least."

"That's what I'm here for, I even brought some tupperware to sneak some out for Mina."

"Where's Mina, anyway? I thought she was your plus-one." Will looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of Beverly's roommate to no avail. Bev just shook her head. "She wouldn't be caught dead at a work event, even if it's not *her* work. She's too lazy to cook tonight though, so I promised her a snack."

"Fair enough."

The conversation naturally dwindled, and was sharply brought to an end when more people started filling up the space. Will made the executive decision to go spend the rest of it out on the balcony, undisturbed. Before he could, however, he was promptly stopped by a fast-approaching Jack Crawford. The latter was smiling, which in his case was never a good sign.

"Will, Beverly. Great to see you two here."

Jack's voice demanded attention like no other. You could never have met the man, but upon hearing his words, you'd instantly be captivated, and do whatever it takes to find out what he had to say. Even if it were at your own expense. Will knew this all too well, yet still he could never escape once Jack had let one word in.

"Glad to be here, boss," Beverly smiled. Will cast his eyes down and mumbled an "evening, Jack", suddenly more interested in the tiny flecks of dirt on his shoes. Jack knew him well enough not to question this behaviour, and simply went on talking.

"We have lots of professors tonight, Bloom is giving a speech that'll briefly mention the police academy. We have some personnel I've handpicked to answer questions, you included." At that, he pointed at Beverly, who only gave a thumbs up. "Some trainees are also volunteering with the event assisting tonight, so be nice to them. They're still new."

All that talk got one of Will's eyebrows already beginning to twitch at the idea of socialising. He had doused himself in his favourite overbearing cologne before leaving the house, just in case some guest professor got the wrong idea about him. Even the thought of it made him cringe. Sometimes he felt so arrogant and self-centered, assuming everyone would flock to him because of his scent. Like some lonely damsel from a fairy-tale, waiting for an Alpha knight to whisk them away. On those days, he dared to forego the cologne, and test his theory once again. He always ended up proving himself right, and had to rush back home.

"I'm assuming you don't need anything from me?" he mumbled to Jack, smoothing his twitching brow with the knuckle of a finger.

In the end, arrogant or not, it was always good to be safe.

Jack just gave him a raised brow, the smile not leaving his face. "Believe me, Will, all your colleagues are just as surprised as I am that you even showed up. We won't push our luck." To annotate Jack's words, Bev began to vigorously nod. It was common practice at Quantico to treat Will like a ticking time-bomb. It had begun as a joke amongst the forensics team when Will had been working with them, then shortly after it had become so overused that everyone just automatically defaulted to that instead of any other form of conversation. It was much easier to joke about Will Graham's antisocial tendencies, than to actually talk to Will Graham and face them.

"Just make sure to not scare anyone off," Jack continued, "and if a guest asks anything about the academy or the FBI, direct them to me."

"Or, alternatively, sell them a bunch of bullshit," Beverly chimed in.

"Just," Jack raised a hand, then lowered it back down and sighed. "Just be nice. Johns Hopkins are guests tonight and we want to make a good impression. If we get one of theirs to guest lecture even once, we'll attract more attention, and more potential trainees."

"Since when are you so worried about the academy, Jack?"

"Since my wife started grilling my ass about it. Next question." It sounded like Jack was joking, but knowing Bella, there was probably some truth behind it.

Ever since Jack became The Guru, his approach to the newbies had changed. He used to only be obsessed with catching the bad guys, making sure his moral code, as well as that of the FBI, stuck to every surface he touched, and left an impression. He was all too aware how skewed the term "bad guys" was, especially in his line of work, but his own internal rulebook was set in stone, and did not budge. He followed it to the dot, and nothing else seemed to matter.

Except now, the trainees had wormed their way into his heart. It was no longer just "the bad guys", or just "his morals", it was now the new blood, the new knowledge, and the responsibility of teaching them that. Jack was not used to it in the least, but soon found he rather liked it. And the trainees all had a deep respect for him, and always went to him with their questions.

In a way, it made him feel like the father he never could be. Not because he and Bella were both Alphas, but rather because they'd never been the sort of people to entertain the idea of children. Both were equally obsessed with their work, barely home, and when they were home, they wanted some peace and quiet. There was no room in the Crawford household for a child.

But in the halls of Quantico, there were 'children' aplenty. All seeking Jack's expertise, all little pieces of responsibility stuck to Jack's breast like prickly pin badges. Even without

Bella's nagging, he wanted the best for them.

"You doing okay, though, Will?" Jack's voice lowered, attention falling on the silent Omega before him.

And there it was, that tone of voice. It always managed to sneak in after all the lighthearted jokes and all the banter. It was a tone Jack had never used with anyone or anything, not even with Will. Before Hobbs, that is.

"Peachy," was Will's only reply. He was growing used to it, despite it making his blood boil each time. Each prod and question about his wellbeing sounded to him like a pathetic attempt at an insincere apology, a way for Jack to wash his hands off the guilt.

It was too bad Will *liked* the guilt on him. He wanted it to stay there, forever. Much like the taint he would never wash off of his brain.

There was an awkward silence that followed, as if Jack was expecting something else. Or god forbid, was forming another question of concern. Thankfully, or maybe not, Beverly saved the day by butting in.

"I heard Johns Hopkins has a guy who's really keen on trying his hand at lecturing down here," she helpfully provided, having somehow acquired two champagne flutes in the time Jack had been lost in his head reminiscing. He nodded.

"Yes, Doctor Lecter." Will's head shot up. *Doctor Lecter?* "He's the one I have my eyes set on. Bloom is introducing me to him later this evening, but from what I've seen and heard, he would be an incredible asset."

Their conversation carried on, but Will could not hear a thing. Had he imagined the name? Doctor Lecter?

There was only one Lecter he had ever heard of, and coincidentally, last time he heard from him, he'd been working as an ER surgeon. A doctor.

April 14th 200X

Dearest Will,

I must admit life has been terribly hectic these past few months. I have barely had the time to sit down and devote an hour to some ink and paper.

It is wonderful to hear you have decided to go back to your pursuits in academia. Forgive my crudeness, but I have always believed your brain would be wasted in the police force.

I will regrettably keep this letter short, but know I always think of you, even as I see patient after patient, day after day. No face sticks to my mind the same way as yours, even though I only have your picture to compare.

Tell me, my dear Will, do you still oppose us meeting in person? I am more than aware of your stance on this question, but you know me, and you know I shall always endeavour to attempt to change your mind.

I look forward to reading your future papers, and am excited for what the future shall bring for you in this newfound path.

All my love,

Hannibal Lecter

By the time Will collected himself enough to nonchalantly ask about Doctor Lecter, Beverly was tugging him towards the main hall for Alana's speech. A champagne flute was thrust into his free hand; Jack had disappeared into thin air. There were people chatting around them, a cacophony of sounds, of intelligent conversation with a splash of office gossip, all directed at no one in particular. The bright fluorescent light from above made the room feel like a personification of the loud voices that filled it.

Soon, Beverly had found her own seat near the front of the lecture hall, where Will spotted Jack and Bella having a hushed but animated conversation, before Bella blew her husband a kiss (they rarely kissed in public) and left to join her colleagues. The lecturers from Quantico were scattered about, with no set corner dedicated to them, and most were mingling with the guests from the other universities.

Will's eyes darted from seat to seat, trying to spot anyone remotely familiar and avoid them. In the end, he found a spot in the far back of the room that offered a few empty seats. He downed his champagne and left the flute on one of the tables near the door, before he hastily climbed the steps. It was a perfect place, barely illuminated and quiet. He would still hear Alana's words loud and clear, but he would have the safety of not having to look behind his back in search of the name he so dreaded.

The lights finally dimmed down to a muted yellow, and with them, the voices gradually quieted down until they became a gentle hush. With this lighting, Will's corner was almost fully hidden from view. The only thing noticeable about him became the glint of his glasses. He allowed himself to let out a breath and sink lower into his seat. He had half expected his fate to play a cruel joke on him, to lure the man he refused to believe was real right at his feet-

"Is this seat taken?" came a voice to his left. Will didn't bother turning around, too busy cursing fate with every word in his vocabulary. He didn't *have* to turn around, the scent was confirmation enough. It was a scent he knew well. Though usually it came from folded sheets of paper, flooding his nostrils the moment they were warmed by his hands.

All he could do was shake his head, and he felt the radiating body heat of the Alpha that now sat to his left.

Hannibal Lecter was sitting next to him, in a packed lecture hall, in the academy he lectured at.

Neither said a word. Both were thinking about all the words they had ever said.

[20XX]

Dear Hannibal,

I've been thinking a lot about our letters, about our friendship, in general. Despite never seeing you in person, I feel like out of all the people in my life, you know the most about me.

There is something so magical about writing letters, something I didn't realise when we were younger. it's almost as if writing in a diary, burying the words deep within yourself, only to later realise they're being read by another soul. And by then, it's too late to take it back, and they already know all your deepest thoughts.

If we were to have met in person, instead of through letters, I might never have formed such a deep connection with you. It is so odd, isn't it? We're so far apart, and yet you're closer to me than anyone has ever been. Do you feel the same way?

If we ever met in person now, my first emotion would probably be fear. It would be like seeing a part of me being torn away from me and standing on its own in front of me. There is a reason we get creeped out if we stare in the mirror for too long. I wonder when I began to see us as interconnected pieces of each other. I blame your romantic novels for all that, just so you know.

I got a courtship proposal today. Alana Bloom. She's the Alpha I told you about, a colleague from the academy. I was thinking of saying yes. My house has been empty for as long as I remember, my only companion in life has been my father, who is now long gone.

They often say Omegas were not meant to live alone. I chalked it up to the other bullshit they say about us, but it's starting to really get to me. it's probably more because I'm human, rather than anything else.

The dogs are noticing it too, I think. They've been very affectionate as of late. It's as if the little bastards pity me. I could swear Buster called me "old maid" the other day. It was in his eyes.

I know your last courtship was a disaster, but have things gotten better for you? I really hope so. I can't imagine it's easy to dodge all of these fickle people who are after your title.

Though, I hate to admit it, part of me is glad we're both alone. It could be 'the possessive nature of my gender'. I can almost hear your laughter as you're reading. That's funny, isn't it. I've never heard your laughter in my life, and yet I picture it so clearly in my mind. I wonder if it would be a perfect match to what my imagination has conjured up.

I don't think I ever want us to meet in person. I don't think I could bear it. I've said it so many times before, but it never seems to change.

Despite it all, you're always in my thoughts.

Yours,

Will Graham

There was an air of mystery that flowed about a person when they had a big secret to keep. It whispered poetry through their blood, their facial expressions, the very essence of their presence. It begged to be revealed, and the more stubborn a person was, the more intense the whispering became. There were pros and cons that came with harbouring a secret. To have something that entirely belonged to you, tucked away in the corners of your mind where no one could touch it, brought forward a primal satisfaction and content. It was ownership, and it was belonging.

It was alarmingly easy for Will to immerse himself into the made-up world of his letters, to breathe in the perfume that travelled thousands of miles to get to his desk and to pretend Hannibal was in the room with him. The ease of it eventually hit Will in the face like a brick of reality, and in later stages of his life, he was finally brought to the cons.

It was easy, all too easy, to forget the consequences of your words and statements, when they were sealed in an envelope.

Sometimes, Will Graham lost track of his thoughts, and could not stop them from roaming. He was unable to pull back the reins, unable to bury his feet in the present moment and stay grounded. Those times were spurred on by all kinds of serendipitous events. The warmth of the sun on his face, the sound of somebody's shoes scraping the pavement as they clumsily

walked. The colour of the eyes of the person on the other end of the room as they accidentally caught each other's gazes. Will Graham's mind would latch onto these moments, and bury itself into their core, become them. It was almost impossible to escape. One minute he was wondering about what he would need to buy for dinner, the next he was running down the halls of a stranger's childhood memories.

They were not visions, nor some supernatural power that let him read minds. He called them daydreams, the bureau called them his superpower. Hannibal used to call them his charm. Stripped down from the world's interpretation of it, it all boiled down to an active imagination, and heaps and heaps of empathy. Will Graham could not help empathising with everyone and everything around him, because at one point in his early childhood, it had saved his life. Now, he could never seem to shut it off. He was stuck in a perpetual cycle of daydreams, and no living.

For years, he had found his perfect outlet, on pen and paper. Living a life separated from all his weaknesses, with a man who his empathy could never touch, because he was never there, in front of him. That life had been too peaceful, too exciting and precious, Will coveted it, yearned for its preservation.

When he was faced with the consequences of what he'd created, however, it had all burst into flames.

At one point, Hannibal had begun making grand gestures through his letters, speaking of very real, very possible outcomes of the imminence of the two of them meeting for the first time. The Alpha had spoken of the future, had involved both of them in it, together. Will and Hannibal, in the real world, face-to-face.

The image of that future had terrified Will beyond measure. He had gone over all the things he'd ever said, things he had mostly forgotten the moment the words had been written, and he had then finally faced the reality of his own making. Hannibal Lecter was a real person. And he knew him so truly, so deeply, that it terrified him. In his blind terror, Will had done what he did best. He ran away. Or in this case, he stopped writing.

He'd tried his hardest to find a place for himself that did not involve his secret. He'd tried to meet people, he'd given courtship another chance. Eventually, his desperation gave way to a muted, grey existence. He lived, he worked, and he did not think of much else. He was just Will Graham, alone in the world by his own design.

Soon after, Hobbs had happened. And everything had crumbled to dust. Will had been stripped bare, down to the deepest parts of himself, and he had realised he did not like what he saw, not one bit. After that, he had done everything in his power to remove himself from every room he went into.

Nowadays, he wore glasses and never looked beyond their frames. Nowadays, he saw a pen and thought of a scent sticking to a piece of paper, buried in his attic, and his heart ached.

Nowadays, he was his lifelong idea of a normal member of society. With no dirty secrets, and no faces hiding behind the corner of the next door.

Will Graham was miserable.

It was easier to look back at life from the present. Often Will found himself reliving the worst moments of his youth just to feel safer. He could replay them time and time again, and he always had the comfort of knowing they would always have the same ending. The repetition soothed him. The memory of the hurt was a cooling balm to his skin. It was familiar.

Except Hobbs, of course. The memories connected to that name were always as painful as they were the first time he'd experienced them. There was no comfort in remembering everything falling apart, and recognising the ruin it had brought with itself.

Nevertheless, the good memories always seemed to hurt him the most. Will hated thinking about them, because it always led to the realisation that they were not his anymore. They belonged to the past, he could never have them again.

He could not have Hannibal again. Not in a way that mattered. Not because Hannibal didn't want him, but because the Will from the past was not there anymore. It would never be what it was. Will had made sure of that. At least he believed he had.

Will's heartbeat reached his ears, drowning out all other noise from the room. Alana was speaking, a few impolite people were whispering, a woman was coughing, another was sneezing. Will heard none of it. All he could hear were the *thump-thump-thumps* in his ears, and Hannibal Lecter's soft breaths somehow permeating through them.

Will turned his head to finally face him, and before he could, a gentle hand seized his own, sweaty one, and put something in his palm.

It was a mint candy.

Puzzled, Will looked up and finally met the eyes of Hannibal Lecter — his penpal of more than twenty years. Ex-penpal, really. The last time he'd written to him was to say he'd be focusing on his life, on building a family. What a joke that was, he doubted either party believed his words, even back when he had said them almost truthfully. *Look at me now, what must he think of me?*

"To help with your nerves," Hannibal whispered, in a friendly tone. Will had never heard him speak before.

It was all so unexpected. Perhaps it was the absurdity of it, the cherry on top of this ridiculous evening, but before he could stop himself, Will barked out a laugh in the silent room.

Alana was startled into silence for a moment or two, in which a wide assortment of disgruntled faces turned in their direction, and a few growls were heard from the front rows.

Alana resumed speaking after clearing her throat, moving on to praising the forensics team and the rest of the faculties. Will popped the mint candy in his mouth and tried to become one with his seat. With the initial moment over, he could relax enough to use his periphery vision again. He discreetly looked to his left, moving only his eyes, and he soon found what he was looking for. Hannibal's hand, resting calmly atop the man's linen-coated thigh. *The hand that wrote all the letters in my attic.* Will could not help but lock eyes with the appendage. Unbidden came the image in his mind of a drawing, one of many. One he had requested of Hannibal's hands. Subconsciously he compared the two. Life imitates art, art imitates life. There they are, together.

Alana had finished her speech. Hannibal was the first to clap. Unable to do much else, Will mirrored him.

Hannibal had always been much more bold. Not because he was an Alpha, but because he was Hannibal.

Even in their written correspondence, Hannibal would always find a way to command the conversation. His words were designed to influence, much unlike Will's, which were just designed to exist. The Omega had no filter to run his thoughts through when it came to Hannibal. In their letters, that was their dynamic.

Now how the fuck was Will supposed to gauge their dynamic in real life?

Hannibal was standing next to him in the first staff meeting since the event three weeks ago. It had been going for about forty minutes, and they usually took an hour. Will had barely heard any of it, but had attempted to throw a comment here and there about upcoming quizzes, mostly just to prove a point to himself that he was present. But for the past fifteen minutes, he had just been staring at the chin of whoever had something to say, trying and failing to soak up whatever information was thrown at him. The sounds of the room were not enough to occupy Will's mind either. No matter how much he tried to focus on the scribbling of the teaching assistant who was taking the minutes, or on Alana's meticulous movements of her wooden coffee stirrer, his ears just automatically caught on the subtle inhales and exhales of the man to his left.

The man who deliberately came into the room right after Will and no earlier, as to seat himself right next to the Omega.

They had had a conversation after Alana's talk, during that first night they saw each other. To Will's surprise, it had been terribly mundane. Hannibal had enquired about his work and his dogs, Will had told him about Laurie's passing, and about the new addition of Winston. They had said goodnight.

And that had been it.

When Will got home that night, he felt numb. Years of fearing that very encounter, and it had been so... normal. It left him feeling pissed off. Being aware of the irrationality of his anger did nothing to quell it. If Will Graham was good at one thing, it was sitting in his own emotions for as long as he wanted.

The thing he'd been most afraid of was his empathy, and how it'd affect his relationship with Hannibal once the Alpha was in the room with him. He'd imagined every possible scenario - looking into Hannibal's eyes for a second too long and seeing something he was not meant to, breaching a boundary he'd not been aware of. So often had he imagined this exact encounter, that in his mind the two of them had met thousands of times. In half of them, Will had ended up miserable, and in the other, he'd ended up in the Alpha's arms.

Not in a single one had he ended up just having a normal conversation and calling it a day.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Will's head snapped to his left, where Hannibal looking at him expectantly with the same patient smile he always sported. It was less of a smile, and more of a crinkle of his eyes. The reason Will's attention was so easily captured by it, was because it was one of the few things about Hannibal he had not grown used to. He could never see his eyed through his writing. Only his thoughts.

One look around was enough to prove that somehow the staff meeting had come and gone, and now the two of them were the only remaining people in the room. A bead of sweat began forming on Will's forehead, but Hannibal seemed to read his mind.

"Your input was not needed for the last part, otherwise I would have grabbed your attention earlier," he assured. "I will brief you on what they discussed, if you like."

"Thanks," murmured Will. "You didn't have to wait for me. Sorry I spaced out."

"Do you often space out?"

"You know I do. I've told you probably a million times." Will quipped. What a ridiculous question, as if Hannibal hadn't been reading his letters all these years!

The silence stretched a second too long and prompted Will to look back up at Hannibal's face. He almost wished he didn't. The man was sporting a grin Will never thought he would see on his face. Gone was the Mona Lisa smirk, thrown out the window.

"What's so funny?"

Hannibal exhaled. "Nothing at all. I merely realised this is the first time you have made a reference to our past conversations."

"Did you think I would just pretend our twenty years of friendship never happened?" Will scoffed.

"It occurred to me, yes." Hannibal looked away, leaving the rest of his statement unsaid. Leaving the part where Will stopped writing, the part where Will *left*.

He was right, of course. It was a good assumption, and it was definitely something Will would do. Avoidance was his vice and virtue. That did not at all stop him from baring his teeth at the remark.

“Well it seemed unnaturally easy to you to just pretend we were passing acquaintances when we first met in person.”

“I was only following your lead, Will.”

“My lead?! Since when do you follow my fucking lead?”

At the sharpness of Will’s language, Hannibal inclined his head.

”Tell me, why are you really upset?”

”Because you-” because what? Hannibal didn’t sweep him off his feet? “Because...” It was a fair question. Will didn’t know the answer.

“Do you not want me to be here?” The question was tentative, but loaded. It was not the question Will wanted to hear, but he had no energy to argue it. He shook his head. “I want you here, I think that’s part of the problem.”

That seemed to be the correct answer, as he immediately felt a shift in the air. Hannibal’s scent mellowed, the sour undertones gradually fading into neutrality. The Alpha smiled. A twinkle in his eye betrayed a flash of buried irritation. A theory he was now learning was the truth. It made Will feel strangely guilty.

“I assume this line of thinking has to do with the abrupt end of our conversations via post.”

“I thought our friendship had reached its natural end,” Will mumbled, his hands seeking refuge by the discarded papers on the table. “I really made myself believe it. It seemed a perfect timeline to things. Clear beginning and clear end.” He folded the corner of a page. On top of it someone had written ‘ *Minutes from last meeting* ’ in barely decipherable handwriting. “I fabricated it all, I realise now. It was easy to pretend it was a mutual decision when you weren’t in the room with me.”

“And subsequently, me being in the room now puts an end to a delusion you were not aware you had set on yourself.”

That statement would have ordinarily made Will incredibly prickly, but there was no denying it, so he just exhaled a soft snort of laughter in agreement. “You could say that.” He folded the other corner. “The reason I wanted to believe it ended was because it was getting so hard to want to live outside of our letters. Going back to my work and my life became more difficult each month and each year. Part of me thought that if I stopped, it would be easier.”

Hannibal inhaled. Another corner was folded.

“Was it?”

“I’m not sure.” Truthfully, he wasn’t. Since he stopped writing, his life had spiralled into a routine that held no meaning, a day-by-day existence that he’d never grown used to because he’d always had Hannibal’s company, even just on paper. He’d attempted to embrace it, but all he’d done, he just now realised, was he’d fallen into it. And his memory served him nothing but grey. “Either way, you’re here now, so whatever I had planned has already flown out the window.”

Will felt a presence behind his chair. While he was lost in thought, Hannibal had vacated his chair and now stood hidden behind his back. Will did not turn.

“And now that I am here, what direction have your plans taken?” came the Alpha’s voice. Positioned this way, Will could pretend the question was coming from the back of his skull, from the depths of his mind. It made him think of all of Hannibal’s letters. He’d always read them with his own voice in his head, because he had never known what the Alpha sounded like.

“I can’t say I know the direction they’ve taken, but I can definitely say the one they haven’t.”

“Oh?”

He felt warmth behind him, growing slowly, imperceptibly. Hannibal was moving closer to him. His hands were now on the back of the chair. Radiating warmth.

“It’s not at all how I thought it would go,” Will tried to clarify.

”And how did you imagine it going?”

Silence. With every passing second, the walls began to itch to answer in Will’s stead, they pitied him so.

”Grand,” he said at last.

”Grand?”

”I imagined it would be grand,” Will repeated. He folded the last remaining corner of the paper. “No one else in the room, somehow just the energy of you walking in would send everyone away, and it would be just you and I.

”And I would look at you and freeze, and yet I’d keep looking. I wouldn’t be able to help it. Our eyes would just find each other and nothing would stop us from just looking, looking, looking.”

”Look at me, Will,” whispered the Alpha. Hannibal’s gaze called out to him, as much as his words did. But Will resisted; he shook his head. The warmth at his back increased another fraction. Hot air tickled his ear.

”You described the scene just as it felt to me on that day.” Hannibal was now hovering over him, his mouth so close Will felt every breath on his skin. He shivered.

"When I sensed your scent, I believed I was imagining things. It was as if everything around me disappeared. As if, unbidden by the laws of science and the universe, time had stopped, just so I could savour the moment eternally. It was just you and I, and the words from our pasts." Will folded the sheet in half, as if by habit. "I had never felt more grounded as I felt in that moment, when I first had the chance to lay eyes on you."

There they were. His beautiful words. They had somehow escaped the confines of the paper, and had snuck their way in the room, right there, behind Will, together with the man himself. It would be so easy, so easy just to give in, like he usually did.

Will's eyes darted around, looking for a pen, before he remembered he could speak. He raised his head just a fraction, mindful of the unmoving Alpha at his back. He finally took his turn inhaling, much like Hannibal had been doing since he entered the staff room. He decided to employ what he knew best. Avoidance.

"I think I'm just... overwhelmed, now that you're finally here." He exhaled. His fingers had bent the paper unbeknownst to him, and the folded corner had torn, just a little.

Hannibal, being Hannibal, was not deterred by the statement. In twenty years he had never once been deterred by Will's dismissive statements. He did what he had always done, and ignored them.

Then, unexpectedly, something touched the junction of Will's neck. Hannibal was scenting him, he realised, the Alpha's nose, slightly colder, gently caressing his skin. His heart rate jumped. Then, just as unexpectedly, Hannibal rose back, all the warmth leaving with him.

"*Finally* is indeed a word for it." the retreating Alpha acquiesced. "It is as if it was always meant to happen. We were always meant to come face-to-face, one way or another. Have a good morning, Will."

Before Will could reply or turn, Hannibal had left the room. In truth, Will had not attempted to do either of these things, he had been too focused on something else entirely.

This was the first time he and Hannibal had ever touched.

Teacup

Chapter Notes

Hannibal starts a temporary job in Quantico as a lecturer. The Ripper appears. Will has internal battles with himself. Nothing is new, yet everything is changing.

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TW for this chapter: mentions of p*dophilia (in a discussion about a Ripper victim), dubious consent, and usual graphic depictions of murder/violence which are similar to the show's.

In truth, they've had many opportunities to hear each other's voices, see each other's faces, and even meet in person. They could have given each other their phone numbers, exchanged emails, hell, they could even have Skyped.

But they never did.

They were both hopeless romantics, drunk on novels from forgotten times. Will believed any other connection apart from the letters would ruin the magic they had with each other. Hannibal did not mind as much, but he found it hard to disagree with his dear friend. However, the Alpha soon began to seek more, to colour his words with promises and requests, all of which Will shot down.

When Hannibal loved, he loved deeply.

His love was an all-consuming force of nature, a swarm of insects crawling on one's skin, leaving bites and marks and scratches in their wake. To be loved by Hannibal meant to be the recipient of humanity's every aspect - the good and the bad. To be loved by Hannibal, meant to be alive. In the ugliest, and most beautiful sense of the word.

When Will loved, he loved in denial, in fear. The last thing Hannibal would do was to call any attention to said love. He would rather enjoy it in silence, in the glimpses of encrypted confessions between sheets of paper, in the innocent doodles of flowers and dogs in the corners.

Still, that never stopped Hannibal from running his usual schemes. Years ago, before he'd realised just how deep his love for his friend ran, he began scenting every letter, "accidentally" rubbing his wrist at the bottom. Curiously, Will had never commented on it. Hannibal wondered if the scent was lost during the delivery process. It brought a slight frown to his features, yet he never stopped doing it since. He would conjure, on occasion, a picture

of Will in his mind palace, hunched over his desk, nose pressed to the paper bearing the Alpha's words. The frown would soon fade away after he did so.

19XX

Will had no one he was willing to admit it to, but the scent of Hannibal's letters was so comforting.

He wondered if it was on purpose, if it was a sudden thing, or if he just hadn't noticed it before. But each time he opened a letter, he would be greeted by the now familiar scent he assumed was Hannibal's own. It smelled warm, had a bite to it. Smelled human. Like no human Will had ever scented. Each time he finished reading the letter, he would tentatively bring it to his nose, with a deep inhale, and imagine Hannibal were there with him.

He would put it down after, and ignore the heat spreading to his cheeks and ears.

Will felt the phantom bugs crawling on his skin from time to time, sometimes he woke up with the vivid thought of himself covered in welts. He only needed to strip in front of the mirror, and he would see them there. He felt it all, and he ignored it. Much like life had taught him to. Much like he ignored the comfort that it brought him.

Will was thirty-five now, just as single as he had been five years ago, when he'd admitted to his disappointment about it to Hannibal.

He'd tried courtship with Alana, he really had. She treated him well, but it just wasn't... working. He supposed his resentment towards her had started growing as soon as she'd begun treating him like an Omega. When she first scented his heat on him.

She hadn't done it on purpose, she probably wasn't even aware of it, and Will never commented on it. All her gentle, condescending comments, her acts of service, they were all normal for an Alpha who was interested in courtship. They came from a place of interest, of curiosity. Of norms one had learned in their childhood and had not properly stopped to question. He supposed it was new for both of them. The romance beyond casual flirting. But they'd both failed, because they'd both relied on preconceived notions about each other, and about love. They'd both had different things in mind.

After Hobbs, Will had expected her behaviour to change for the worse. He'd expected more doting, more coaxing his feelings out of thin air, and he'd braced himself for it. When he'd

gotten back to work from weeks spent in the hospital, however, Alana had not mentioned a thing. He could feel her anger, could see it shimmering in her eyes every time she looked at him, but he knew it was never aimed at him. He was eternally grateful she never voiced it. It comforted him in a way she had never managed before.

Hannibal knew everything about his relationship with her, except the aftermath of Will's incident. Will had asked him for advice, even had philosophical debates with the man on secondary genders and his never ending disdain for his own. The expectations, the assumptions, the people. They had all been too much.

Five months into the courtship with Alana, Will had realised he'd only stuck around because he liked discussing it with Hannibal. The realisation had left him speechless. He'd had a long conversation with Alana about it, trying desperately to form an excuse without giving away his secret pen pal. But there was no way to salvage that. He had wasted time and effort from both sides. And by extension, had ruined their tentative friendship. They greeted each other in the academy, now, but it was never more than idle small-talk. It was awkward.

When Will had broken things off with Alana, Hannibal had sent him a sketch of himself and Will, seated on a bench in the Uffizi. He had been out of Italy for nearly two years now, yet Will was sure it was a perfect likeness. Hannibal's memory had always been incredible. He'd drawn Will with a small smile on his face, and himself with a besotted expression. They were both looking at something beyond the paper. Will pretended it was a photograph, and it cheered him up. He sent him a picture of himself holding Buster in exchange.

He could not let this go. No matter what. In the curved paths of his life experiences, in the corners of all his past failed relationships, lay the constant presence of Hannibal's words, Hannibal's sketches, Hannibal's face.

The notebook labelled "Hannibal" had now grown into five full notebooks and three folders. Will could never bring himself to throw any letter out, or any drawing. Almost half of the horse sketches, the flowers and the dogs, he had left for his dad, when he moved out years ago. He had no idea where they were now, but he had looked at each one long enough to remember them.

He never managed to write to Hannibal about Garret Jacob Hobbs. He never found the words. Before he managed, he had already decided to stop writing altogether. His last letter to Hannibal had had the undertones of a goodbye, but he had not dared to declare that that was it. He'd left Hannibal to find out for himself.

And now, here they were, brought back together again, like a stubborn teacup that Will himself had thrown against the wall.

They confirmed Hannibal would be keeping his post for the remainder of the school year. He had apparently made his plans clear with his employer at Johns Hopkins, and had been given

the green light. This was news to most of the staff at Quantico, to all except Bella Crawford, who had arranged the position for him. Jack was overjoyed with the new addition, already thinking of ways to advertise this to potential trainees. He'd rung Emily at admin, who kept the academy website up to date, and shared those plans with her. Both seemed determined to milk every opportunity the new Alpha lecturer would present for Quantico's future.

This begged the question, which a lot of people seemed confident enough to ask: what *was* Hannibal Lecter doing in Quantico? Why give up the prestige of Johns Hopkins, not to mention the *salary* at Johns Hopkins, for a position that was lower in every aspect?

The Alpha seemed to be caught with this question on more than one occasion, and on every single one, he had the same answer. Conveniently, always within earshot for Will to hear.

"I had something calling to me here, in Baltimore. I've come to find it."

The way he said *something* caught midway on his tongue, as if he meant to say some *one*, and stopped himself only for the theatrics of it. Everyone caught on it, and Will assumed that was the purpose. It was such a typical Alpha gesture that he could not even get annoyed by it. He just huffed and carried on walking to wherever his destination at the time was.

Hannibal, to his credit, did not bother him all too much. The man seemed content to just be in the vicinity of wherever Will found himself. He would walk past him in the corridors with a pleasant greeting and a warm smile. Will could not help but smile back, the feeling of Hannibal being another part of himself not quite having left his psyche, despite the Alpha no longer existing only in the letters Will read with his own voice.

Soon, Will grew used to Hannibal's presence at his workplace. The Alpha wasted no time in familiarising himself with everyone around him, and soon his course on *First Response Emergency Care - Intermediate*, or FRECI, held its first lecture. He quickly became popular with the trainees, both for his charms and his practical way of teaching, and his course's title was shortened in conversation as the *freaky* class. Beverly and Jimmy seemed to find that hilarious when Will told them.

Will and Hannibal never held a conversation for more than two minutes, after their encounter in the staff meeting. It almost seemed as if Hannibal were avoiding him, but that term didn't quite fit in Will's mind. It was more like Hannibal was doing it in *Will's* favour, to ease him into this new chapter of their lives. Will could not help but draw comparison to courtship. Even the word itself made him blush. He found comfort in his predicament, however, and he did nothing to challenge it. Just as Hannibal seemed content to only see him around the building, Will found similar pleasure in catching glimpses of him, and of his scent.

He began to hope anew, that their relationship could be rekindled, and that no incident would sabotage it this time. He was determined to let it grow at its own pace, and not stump it as he was usually fond of doing.

It was raining outside.

It was one of those long rains, those that last for days and days, making you forget what it feels like to look at the clear sky. It was depressing, just as it was reassuring.

Will sat hunched over his desk in his office at Quantico, internally cursing every god he knew for not letting him be at home, snuggling with his dogs. He wanted to spend some more time with Winston, the pack's newest member. The dog was quiet and intelligent, Will had not heard him bark once since he brought him home. He sighed at the thought of his little family waiting for him at home, and gathered his notes. The lecture hall was dark and looming when he entered. It made Will feel as if the entire building was in deep slumber, unbothered by the pattering of rain on its roof.

It was refreshing to go back to the classroom after a few days of absence. Will had gone part-time this year, driven by some misplaced desire to seek a life outside of the workplace. He reckoned he'd be back to full-time by the next academic year, but for now he enjoyed the time spent with his dogs at home. He had enough savings, thanks to the settlement he'd reluctantly agreed on with the FBI. His story with Hobbs never made it to the tabloids thanks to it, and it saved the Bureau a lot of unnecessary trouble.

The early risers began to fill up the lecture hall, each of them familiar enough with their professor as to not approach him with any curious enquiries. Will was a good teacher, so long as he was the one doing the talking. He lacked the passion many others had, who insisted on having the entire classroom participate. He left that passion to his students to find for themselves. All he could give them was insight, and tasks.

There was an air of peace around the Quantico halls, quickly disturbed by the stormy entrance of Jack Crawford, trailed by two officers Will could not recognise.

"Will, I need to talk to you," the head of the BAU said, leaving no time for introductions. Will just raised his eyebrows and glanced at the rest of the room, trying to hint at his approaching lecture. Much as he expected, Jack turned to the group of trainees scattered across seats, and his voice boomed in the heightened acoustics of the hall. "Class dismissed, go to Alana's *Prevention and Radicalisation* next door."

The lecture hall began to lose the few students that had wandered in, and Will made a mental note to get the material from Alana when the day was done. He would have to edit some assignments later, the headache of it was already beginning to form.

"What is it, Jack?" he finally asked, when they were alone at his desk. The officers had made themselves comfortable and were sitting in the front row, murmuring to each other in low tones. Jack pretended they were not there.

"You know you have helped me in the past, Will, and I am immensely grateful for your help," the Alpha began, his voice having the grace of portraying just a hint of regret. "And I vowed to not ask you again, given the circumstances that followed."

"And yet here you are." Anger began bubbling up in Will's throat, intermingling with the pulsing headache that made him wish to crush his glasses on the desk. He had guessed

immediately the reason behind Jack's visit. It was not every day the head of the Behavioural Science Unit came to disturb your work and have a chat. "I'm sure you have a great explanation for this, Jack, but my stance is still the same. Hobbs was the first and the last. I am not made for field work."

"Will, believe me when I tell you this, I would not be coming to you if I weren't desperate," Jack sighed, his age suddenly becoming apparent. "This case is nothing like we've seen before, not even close to the Shrike. The police are in an uproar, the FBI has been scrambling for any loose ends and there are none. Every department is waiting for it to hit the news, the tabloids are probably writing about it as we speak."

"And you want to make the FBI's incompetence my problem?" Will asked, his expression blank. "The last time I helped you, Jack, my brain caught on fire. And I know you like to make the argument it was coincidental, but the fact of the matter is this. I cannot allow the same level of stress into my life again. I'm not the same I was before it all happened, I have to actively make decisions that benefit my health now. Because it's been fucked over too many times. I cannot help you, Jack, not if I don't want history to repeat itself."

The statement had finality to it, enough that Will could almost see Jack walking away and not bothering him again. It was, however, Jack Crawford he was talking to. The man had come so far in life not because he made compromises, but because he got around them.

"I promise you, Will, what happened with Garret Jacob Hobbs will not happen again. And I can make that promise, because I am confident in keeping it," he employed that persuasive Alpha voice of his, that left little room for argument. It worked its magic no matter the situation, and Will could already feel the dread building up in his gut, because he knew he would listen. "All I ask of you, *all* I ask for is a second opinion. Not extra field work, not any report or any interviews or any *sociable* task you dread so much. I'm just asking you to take one look, *one*, and tell me what you see. I will let you go afterward. That's all I ask."

They both knew that wasn't true. The glint of Jack's eye betrayed his intentions, and Will *was* Will. The exact reason Jack was here, asking him for this, in the first place, also made him see through the facade of the small favour he was about to grant him.

He knew where this led, and yet, he could not say no. Jack knew this as much as he did. At least *saving lives* had a much more noble ring to it than *living* did.

When Will reluctantly nodded, Jack had the grace to hold himself back from smiling triumphantly. The Alpha merely nodded back to him, the frown on his face ever-present, trying desperately to hide the satisfaction of a conquered argument.

Dear Hannibal,

Last night a thought came to me, unbidden. I had a conversation with my Dad that almost left me in tears, as usual. I keep trying to give him chances, to help him understand me and my biology. I love him so dearly, I'm constantly blinded by the potential I see in him that had only existed when I was just a toddler and didn't know any better. He was perfect to me then, my hero. The only parent I have, the only role model I needed.

The thought was this - I think I was created for violence. I think I was bred for it, I belong to it. Part of me thinks I'm also hopelessly attracted to it. The violence of my father, the violence I extend to myself. Everywhere I go I seem to be surrounded by it, as if I call to it, or it calls to me. If there were a God, and if I believed in Him, I think He made me for violence. My fate is tied to it. It's a comforting thought, it gives me a sense of purpose, oddly enough.

I am writing this at a very late hour, nearly three in the morning. I assume the words will read quite differently in the light of day, but I will trap it in the letter before then.

I wonder, what do you feel your purpose is, if you ever think of such a thing. Something noble, I bet. Is it your future in the medical field, or your passion for the arts? Knowing you, it must be something beautiful.

Do you believe, Hannibal, that I am misinterpreting my fate? Maybe you could be my voice of reason and tell me I'm wrong. That violence is just a byproduct of life and we all experience it, and that it has nothing to do with me, no more meaning than I myself give to it.

I would love to be proven wrong someday, I feel you of all people could actually manage it.

It's three o'clock now. Two minutes past, to be exact. Did you know they call this the devil's hour? It's when all supernatural beings roam free. Perhaps the devil is lurking behind my door, patiently waiting to take me away. Maybe that is my true fate. Who knows.

To end on a positive note, as I suddenly feel guilty for boring you with all my nightly thoughts, I am moving out in two weeks. As you already know, I was accepted into the police academy. It was why I was arguing with my father. He doesn't see the job as fit for an Omega. I think part of him wanted me to marry instead of work. He's too afraid of seeing him become like him, and suffer to make ends meet. But I think the academy will save me from that fate. I've worked so hard and I will surely reap the benefits. I've always wanted to help people. I feel like I am now one step closer to that goal. How very Omegan of me.

I'll be sharing a dorm with a Beta. His name is Matthew, we met each other at the open-day. His family was very kind. He seemed a little odd, but he was easy to talk to.

I cannot wait to go, but my heart is also hurting. Saying goodbye to family is the most bittersweet thing in the world. I don't know how to feel about leaving my father alone, but I cannot stay by his side forever. Life calls, as they say.

I hope your studies are not stressing you too much. But knowing you, you probably enjoy it.

All my love,

Will

Will had always been convinced Buster was secretly a supernatural being. The small dog somehow always sensed a phone call seconds before it would come through. Every time, without fail, he would start barking right before the phone rang, which would then prompt Will to take the call outside on the porch if he wanted to hear anything from the other side. When Will had shared this information with Jack, the other man had laughed and said something about computer speakers and old telephones.

The pastel blue clock on the wall read six forty-six in the afternoon. It had been a gift from Will's students a few years back, during a time when he had consistently failed to show up to his own classes on time. Despite it being the idea of one or two students who'd tried to be funny, Will still always thought of the present with warmth in his heart. Back then he'd used tiredness as an excuse, but most everyone knew it was a bigger monster eating at his heart. Now at least, that time was over, and he always had the time readily available to him in his kitchen.

The chopping of a slightly dulled knife from overuse mixed with the sound of the clock's subtle ticking. The more Will looked at the little pieces of carrots, the redder and redder they seemed. If he remained unblinking for another minute or two, they would eventually melt into a pool of warm blood and seep from the countertop down to the floorboards. If he squinted his eyes ever so slightly, each piece was almost identical to the chopped up fingers of Abigail Hobbs. They were pointing at him, pointing and accusing.

Buster's bark sharply echoed through the air, making Will almost drop the knife on his own fingers. There would be an irony in that, he thought before he made his way to his mobile, which lay on the coffee table in the other room. As if on cue, the default-setting ringtone sounded just as he picked it up. That was all expected, all rehearsed by the universe and by Will himself. What was not expected however, was the unknown number on the other line.

"Graham," Will answered gruffly, old habits from working for Jack never quite leaving his day-to-day.

"Good evening, Mr Graham," the voice from the receiver spoke with an undertone of amusement. Will's heart clenched.

"Hannibal," he breathed. "Hi."

“Hello, Will. Are you well?”

“Very well, thank you. Did you need anything?” He hated hearing his voice tremble, he knew Hannibal heard it, too. “Help with assignments, perhaps?” He threw in a joke to mask his nerves, though there was no fooling either of the pair, and he knew it.

“Not at all,” the Alpha’s laugh rumbled, mixed with some static from Will’s old phone. “I admit I don’t really need anything. I only wanted to hear your voice, and ask you about your evening.”

“Oh,” Will took a deep breath, feeling a shiver run down his spine. Only Hannibal could so casually mention something so romantic, like he was remarking on the weather. It was a stark comparison to the way they acted around each other at work, as if they were no more than acquaintances. Will could not stop his perception from telling him that Hannibal was doing that for him. For his freedom at work, for his wishes to remain unnoticed. “Thanks for being honest, then,” he finally said, too affected to muster up a proper reply. “My evening is going well, as well as it could.” His voice trailed at the end, giving way to his thoughts of his conversation with Jack yesterday.

“You don’t sound convinced,” Hannibal prodded, concern painting his words. “Is something the matter?”

Will sighed. In all his attempts throughout the years, he could never lie to Hannibal. He could only omit, much like the Alpha himself often did. It was their intimate dance, they’d practised the choreography for as long as they knew each other.

“Nothing’s exactly *the matter*, it’s just...” he looked up at the clock in his kitchen, trying to root himself into the visual reminder of the passing seconds. Hannibal waited patiently on the other line. “I think I’ve taken up something that will hurt me in the long run,” he finally admitted. It was as much as he would give away. He knew he could not really discuss it with anyone, much less his friend who could read him like a book.

“Ah,” Hannibal’s voice came along with his understanding. “You *are* quite fond of things that hurt you, if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, it would seem so. That much hasn’t changed.”

“I do hope you will find some beauty in that hurt, Will,” Hannibal said, making Will frown just slightly. “Don’t let the hurt consume you, whatever it is you’ve taken on. Focus on what it can do for you, instead.”

Will sighed. “I’ll try to remember that, thanks. Though I’m not sure how applicable it is in my current situation,” he chuckled, no real mirth in his voice.

“You may well be surprised. Just remember my words, Will. That’s all I ask.”

It sounded oddly ominous, though nothing out of character for Hannibal Lecter. The absurdity of it made Will smile, and all he could do was thank his friend and accept his advice, cryptic as it was.

It was Hannibal who hung up, after bidding him a good evening, and Will needed at least thirty seconds before he could put his phone down and get back to his dinner preparations. The carrots looked orange and completely normal now, the image of Abigail Hobbs retreating back to the depths of his mind. He always imagined her so vividly, despite never meeting her in person. Not while she was intact, at least.

The whirring of the car engine was an ambience Will didn't know he needed. Three hours had gone by since he left the house, the only constant of the trip being the car's consistent breathing. Sixteen hours had gone by since Hannibal's unexpected phone call. He wished he had told him, he wanted so desperately to have a reason to call him after this. The thought made him shrink inside himself. He drove on.

When he'd arrived at the destination his GPS was set on, he took a moment to breathe. This was it. His last remaining minutes of freedom, before he'd descend to madness all over again. He killed the engine. Jack was waiting patiently outside.

The first thing that Will noticed upon entering the gallery, was the smell. It was so overwhelming to his senses that he had to hold his sleeve against his nose. He could quickly tell which people were Betas, as they walked around undisturbed. Jack walked to his left, mirroring Will and shielding his face with a mildly disgusted expression.

"He's been in here at least a week, Price says," Jack's muffled voice came through his sleeve. "Gallery's closed for the season, the gardeners who come every Monday noticed a smell near the entrance and called the cops."

The next thing Will noticed, as they walked further into the building, was the noise.

"Bet they didn't expect that," said Will, finally reaching the room where the body supposedly was. The noise was concentrated there, obvious now where the source was. It was an overwhelming sound of static, as if coming from a broken radio. There was a group of people at the door, blocking his view. Some of them were taking pictures, other were writing things down on notepads and tablets.

"No, they didn't," Jack grunted in agreement. "Bet they thought it was a critter."

"They always do."

The *critter* turned out to be an Alpha male. Will did not need anyone to confirm that for him, for he recognised him immediately, much to his dismay. The same face he had looked at on the bulky prison computers all these years ago, during his internship, now looked back at him, this time with its eyes closed, and an apple in its mouth. The rest of the body was hidden behind a massive TV screen, only the head poking through a hole impressively cut out in the middle. The screen was miraculously turned on, displaying only static and the occasional splash of colour between the cracks. Similarly, around the room were numerous broken

screens, all turned on, all contributing to the eerie white noise that made everyone in the room wish to put their hands to their ears.

“George Henderson,” Jack began. “He was a-”

News anchor in the early nineties, Will’s mind supplied. He did not share the knowledge aloud, for he had no time to explain himself. He just nodded along to Jack’s explanations, and listened as the Alpha listed all the visible wounds on the victim’s body. He was dressed in a suit that didn’t quite fit him, a tie that was too tight on his neck it could have choked him, were he still alive, and the most notable bit - his hands were sewn into his body, holding his ribs.

While he listened and catalogued the information, Will couldn’t help but think of the past, and he remembered glimpses of a letter he had written, the contents almost forgotten to him as he’d only read it once before sending it.

Dear Hannibal,

I dread to write about it, but I must come to terms with my disappointment in my career.

As you remember, I was so eager to start in the force, when I finally graduated from the academy. My father even managed to get over his disapproval of my choices, when he heard my voice on the phone. He congratulated me, and wished me all the best. It meant so much to hear from him, from the man who rejected the future I had planned for myself. It took a load off my shoulders. But not for long.

Last summer, as I told you before, I did a placement in a state prison, in the mental health department. I was interviewing people who had just come into prison, doing general assessments and helping with paperwork and admin. General stuff they make students do. But when you work in an establishment, no matter how small the role, you start hearing things.

I learned so much more in that prison than I did at the academy, Hannibal. And, fool as I was, I suppressed it all and pretended it wasn’t there. I was so eager to believe in justice, so eager to trust the cause I was about to be a part of as an officer, I turned a blind eye every time an inmate made a comment, or I witnessed the faults of the justice system myself.

Let me explain.

There was a man I interviewed, homeless, who stole from a department store, and was sentenced to two years in prison. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia and had suffered

brain damage as a child.

There was another man, a news anchor, quite famous but fallen from grace, who had two hundred images and videos of child pornography on his computer. He was sentenced to six months and subsequently got a suspended sentence. He was “bullied” as a child.

The first man was never mentioned on the news, no case was made in his favour, he was forgotten to the world. The second man had articles written about him, about his trauma and his inability to think straight, and people pitied his tragic past.

I forgot all about these men, until my placement was over, until I finished my last year and graduated. Until I started the job I dreamed of, and saw the pattern of the people we were going after and arresting.

It makes me sick, Hannibal, my profession makes me sick. I know if I leave, I will do it no good. The culture already exists, and ensures the good ones don't stay long enough to change things. I really want to change things, but I feel so powerless. All my colleagues see is a helpless Omega, despite all I've shown and proven to be. If they see an ounce of empathy or emotion from me, of compassion for another person, they'll root me out of the system and have a field day.

I realise now, Hannibal, passion and good intentions can only do so much. I feel the same sense of powerlessness in this field that I feel when I look at my own body in the mirror, when I notice people's perception of me.

How does one deal with such a loss of direction? Tell me what to do, Hannibal, for I am hopelessly lost.

Yours,

Will

The sensation of George Henderson's death hit the news hard and fast, and left the public eye just as quick as it had come. The tabloids, much like Jack had guessed, had their fair share of fame covering the murder, and then moved past onto the anchor's dark history. But the moment the justice system came under scrutiny, suddenly no one seemed to be interested in either writing *or* reading about him. Henderson was once and for all forgotten, much like his crimes.

Not to Will. He could hardly forget the man, especially now that he had to profile his killer.

When he stood in the room, absorbing the static and the smell, he attempted to glimpse at their killer's psyche. What he saw reminded him too strongly of his own reaction to seeing the horrible man at first, but then, beneath the first layer, he finally saw him.

A man, Alpha most likely, but not necessarily. Middle aged, elite, intelligent. Meticulous. The killer saw his victim as a means to an end at worst, a pest at best. He had used him as a medium, eager to create a memorable piece out of an individual who was so willing to both be remembered for his greatness and forgotten for his sins. He had made him beautiful. It was no coincidence the killer had picked a gallery to display his first piece. And it *was* his first piece, at least in this area, of that Will was sure. This man, this artist, would not hide his art from the world deliberately. He may have killed before, but this was more than a kill.

"There will be no connection," he told Jack, the surety of his statement surprising the Alpha. "You will waste your time looking at friends and relatives."

He also relayed his initial observations with Jack, though he saved some details about how he felt about the *piece*. It was not enough, by Jack's standards, but it was all he could do. Jack soon acquiesced.

"They call him the News Slasher, you know," Jimmy joined them, soon after he and Beverly were done at the scene.

"Not very memorable," Will murmured, thoughtfully. "It will change, the next time he kills."

"He will kill again?" Jack questioned, a line of stress appearing at his forehead.

"Oh, absolutely."

And he did.

The next few months came with a few peaceful days of proper lectures, and two very disruptive visits from Jack himself into the lecture hall.

After the third kill, the public had called him The Ripper. A name coined by a tabloid reporter, whose article was lucky enough to popularise it.

The other two kills, compared to the first, were not as ostentatious, in Will's opinion. But one thing brought them all together. Each one of them reminded Will of a letter he had sent, years or nearly a decade ago. So far back in his memory, that he was convinced he was just forging memories whenever he saw a body.

It made his blood run cold, but he did not know how to face that thought. It made him think of the same uncertainty he had after Hobbs, right before he was hospitalised. He hoped very dearly his brain was not again catching on fire. He could not bear it a second time.

It had been more than a fortnight after the third body was found. Jack was seemingly happy with Will's insights, though he was no closer to catching his Ripper. Will suspected it would turn into a game of cat and mouse between his boss and the killer. It could last for years, for all he knew and cared. This Ripper was more than capable of playing the long game, of that Will was sure. It frightened him just a little, but most of all, it excited him. It was an ugly excitement, one that came from years of suppressed morbid curiosity. He wondered if the killer would ever get caught, and if Will would be there to see it.

He hoped there would be no new body to bother him for a while, though, as he desperately needed to catch up with his work, lest he feel like he was drowning in it. He had just given his first full lecture since the last scene Jack had brought him to, and was beginning to prepare his students for an upcoming assignment that would make them hate him. He'd taken a lot of material from Alana, as his students had attended more of her lectures than his own. He would have to repay her in some way, soon. Now, he only focused on walking back to his office, where he hoped he would be undisturbed for the evening.

When he walked in, he noticed one thing out of place.

It was an envelope, laying inconspicuously on the edge of his desk, looking as if it came right out of Victorian times. It was sealed with red wax, a dried flower trapped between the seal and the paper, beckoning Will to touch it. The envelope itself was tied on the side with a dark-purple silky ribbon, draping down the edge of his desk, as if trying to jump and hide from him.

He knew exactly who the sender of this letter was, and it filled him with the same giddy anticipation he would always feel as a child.

He could still smell him in the room, his scent unfurling around where his hands had no doubt touched the wooden surface of the desk. It waited there for him, like a silent promise. Will moved to sit on his chair. With gentle fingers, slightly trembling, from fatigue or excitement, he removed the seal and opened it.

There, folded in a creamy sheet of paper, lay Hannibal Lecter's beautiful, unforgettable writing.

My dear Will,

In case of accidentally scaring you away again, I have deigned to employ the medium you are most familiar with, in hope it eases you into accepting my proposal.

It would be a true honour and privilege to have you over for dinner at my house in Baltimore this Friday. At six-thirty, if it suits.

Yours,

Hannibal

All Will could do was stare at the letter, and think. Hannibal's address was written in the same loopy cursive at the bottom of the paper.

The Omegan part of him was jumping around in excitement at the sight of the elegant offer. It felt as if he'd been waiting for it his entire life.

Courtship.

The rational part of him, the *Will Graham* part, reminded him to be afraid. He could easily find an excuse, tell Hannibal he was sick, feeling unwell, that he could not make it. And then, he'd go back to normal. To routine. To glances in the halls, to phone calls in the evening. To the easy interactions that removed him as a participant. Back to the miserable life of Will Graham that had no ounce of Will Graham in it.

He smiled ruefully at the letter, and made up his mind.

He said nothing to Hannibal, when he saw him in the gardens, nor did he leave a note for him. The Alpha made no move to approach him, only challenged his gaze whenever he sensed it. The letter with the scribbled address was burning a hole in his pocket. His fingers itched to grab a pen in turn. Will went home, and waited for Friday to come.

Will smelled him before he heard or saw him.

Dropping his keys onto the kitchen counter, Will noted his dogs seemed calm, but stood away in the corner, not greeting him. They were smarter than him in that regard, they knew when to retreat.

He poured himself two fingers of whiskey by habit and leaned his elbows on the counter, taking a long, bitter sip. Seconds later, he felt a breath on his neck, followed by a kiss.

"Hi, Matthew," he said, propping his head up in his free hand. Matthew Brown, his ex, purred into his throat and kept kissing it. When his tongue darted to lick at where a mating bite would be, Will pulled away. "What the hell are you doing here? It's been months, I've told you to leave me alone."

"I came to see you." His voice hadn't changed a bit. It made Will angry, for some reason. *Repulsed* was a better word. "I missed you," Matthew whispered, "I missed this."

Will did his best to keep his composure. "There is no *this*. I left you two years ago, Matthew, whatever *this* is in your head, it ended then." He took another sip, pretending his throat wasn't closing up.

“Tell me to go away, then,” Matthew challenged, his voice losing any air of romance he’d previously put on. “Tell me to go, and I will.” He took a step closer to Will, the latter frozen in place.

He could tell him to go away, he wanted to tell him to go away. His tongue was lead in his mouth, his limbs refusing to follow his mind’s instructions to move, to shove, to run into the other room and lock the door. All he could do instead, was swipe his thumb at the rim of the glass, and pray that by some miracle it would cut him.

He hated himself for not moving away. He also hated himself for weeping at the warmth that engulfed him when Matthew Brown held him in his arms. He did not reciprocate, but it was enough. It was enough.

“There, there, my Omega,” Matthew shushed. “I’m here, I’ve got you.”

“I’m not your Omega.”

“I know.”

Ever since Will broke things off, Matthew would do this every once in a while. He would always act like Will had a choice to push him away, like it was Will’s decision that let him show up and do as he pleased. He had tried before to tell him to go, but Matthew just twisted his words and stayed anyway. He’d given up eventually, and just let him carry on until he left again. Will could not admit it to anyone, but he enjoyed it when the Beta came to hold him. Sometimes he would just close his eyes and pretend it was natural, that he wanted it and that the warmth didn’t just come from his body’s desperation to be touched.

“To answer your question earlier,” Matthew began, cutting his statement off by nuzzling Will’s neck. “I was running from someone.”

“The cops?”

“Something like that.”

“You can’t keep doing this, Matthew.”

“My flight was never meant to be long. Though I’ve barely begun to ascend.”

Will swallowed, the movement of his Adam’s apple prompting Matthew to put a hand on his throat. Gently. When another tear rolled down Will’s cheek, the Beta licked it and smiled.

Vertigo

Chapter Notes

Things heat up.

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TW for this chapter: brief mentions of a past abusive relationship, dubious consent, and usual Hannibal gorey stuff.

He went to Hannibal's address at six twenty-five, and parked two houses away. While he sat in the car, he unfolded the letter, and read it again. He'd begun writing down a list of what to say at his house, but Winston had looked at him funny, and he'd crumpled it up.

He rested his head on the steering wheel, and tried to imagine how this would go. All he could see were words on paper.

He felt a tingling at his throat, and scratched it. It was marked red from all the scratching he'd been doing since he left the house. He had showered twice, had doused himself in cologne. He'd done everything. But he could not remove the feeling of Matthew on his skin.

Their encounters always made Will feel sick. But now, they also made him feel guilty. His lack of control was no longer only affecting him. Now Hannibal was here, in his life. He felt so powerless, and so evil all the same.

He left the letter in the car, and walked up to Hannibal's doorstep. The Alpha greeted him with a warm smile.

"I am delighted you are here, Will," Hannibal's pleasant voice filled the room with its cadence, fitting so easily into the interior it felt like a part of it. Will stood in the doorway, unsure whether he should take his shoes off first, or his jacket. Luckily, Hannibal made the decision for him, and took Will's jacket with elegant fingers. The Alpha then took a set of dark-blue plaid slippers seemingly out of thin air in the foyer, and set them at Will's feet. The Omega shuffled into them awkwardly, after setting his shoes aside. Hannibal looked at him like he was the proudest man in the world.

Dinner was *not* a simple affair. Though it was exactly as Will had imagined it would be. Hannibal had described his passion for food and the culinary arts countless times in his

letters. He had recounted recipes, cooking lessons with masters from numerous countries. His words when it came to food had always been the most descriptive, the most passionate and colourful, it had filled Will's head with countless flavours and beautiful sights. Looking at Hannibal's table now, he felt like a letter come to life. It thrilled him much more than it scared him. It was a heady feeling, eating Hannibal's food at his table.

Hannibal, in turn, watched Will intently. Every bite the Omega took was met with flashing eyes, the Alpha's teeth looking sharper and sharper with every passing second.

There was a plethora of elegant smells in the dining room, but Hannibal's scent seemed to flow into all of them. It made Will's brain feel like he was consuming parts of Hannibal himself. It was so shockingly intimate, that he could think of little else than this, the two of them together in the dining room, consuming and being consumed. He wondered how much of him Hannibal could scent, if the cologne was doing a good job of hiding his excitement at all. Though Hannibal did not need his nose to tell that his Omega was enjoying himself. He was content, as always, just to watch, and to influence. All else would unfold on its own, eventually. He believed that strongly enough to go about everything with unbeatable confidence.

They ate in silence, for a long time, Will exploring flavour after flavour, Hannibal observing. So much of their friendship had been based on silence. They had spent years on desks, with pens in hand, that it was almost unnatural to break that silence with real words. It was mostly Hannibal who ventured to do so. As he did now.

"Jack Crawford has offered me a position as a consultant," he let the words fill the room, swirling the last bit left of his red wine in the glass. The statement made Will pause, fork halfway to his mouth. He lowered it.

"For the Ripper?"

There was an invisible shiver that ran down Hannibal's spine. He blinked almost innocently, taking a small sip.

"Yes. He also told me he's been employing *your* aid." Hannibal's eyes were shining, taking them to conversations of the past, of confession about violence and hurt.

"He has," Will sighed. "I'm not surprised he's been going to others for help, there's not much more I can give him. I take it he needs your surgical expertise."

"It would appear so," Hannibal smirked, as if Will had just told a profound joke.

Will forced himself to take another bite, to allow a few more seconds of silence. The question crept up, regardless.

"Will you do it?" he asked, a picture forming in his mind. One of Hannibal Lecter at a crime scene, traipsing the deepest, darkest corners of Will's life, combining all his secrets into one. He tried to shake it off, but Hannibal's answer instead solidified it.

"I will."

The next week saw them together at a trail near Charlottesville, Will getting ready for a bloodbath in his psyche, and Hannibal having friendly banter with Jack a few feet away from him.

Upon noting the concern on the Alpha's features, Jack waved a hand in an attempt to scatter his attention.

"Don't worry about Graham, he may appear odd but his work with us is extremely valuable to our case."

Hannibal threw another glance at Will, realising the profiler did not hear nor listen to a word in their conversation. He turned back to Jack, raising a brow innocently.

"I thought Will Graham was a teacher?"

Jack seemed to mill something over in his mind, the tension in his brow giving him away. "Technically he is, but he's no stranger to law enforcement and the work we do. He's an incredible profiler."

"Pardon me for saying, Mr Crawford, but he appears as if he does not at all want to be here." Another glance at the Omega, followed by an expression that was the epitome of genuine concern for a colleague.

The statement made Jack also look back at Will, his frown deepening just slightly.

"Just Jack is fine, please, Doctor Lecter," he sighed, attempting to ease the air into his next statement. "Graham is a complicated one. He may not enjoy what he's doing here while he's doing it, but the result is what makes it all worth it and he knows it. Look around," he waved a hand. "None of us enjoy the stench of death and the things it leaves behind. Those that do only do so because it's become their life, their profession. We love what we do because of the results it brings. Will is no exception. He is good, and he works for what he knows is right."

Hannibal inclined his head to the right, a gleam in his eye going unnoticed. "I see. In that case, I also hope my help will ease everyone's workload, and we will get to the *good* part of the job sooner."

With a nod and an exchange of grim smiles, the two men walked on, changing the subject to a lighter, less meaningful one. Will had fallen behind them a little, and soon he could not see them. It made him breathe just a little easier, though it did not last long.

Hannibal had stopped at some point, letting Jack walk on, and he was waiting for Will. There was a knowing look on the Alpha's face, a look Will had learned to expect from the tone in his letters. It didn't make it any easier, because he knew a personal conversation would

follow. It was the last thing he needed at a place like this, a reminder that he was Will Graham, and that he existed.

“I cannot help but observe that you seem heavily affected by this work, Will, and we have not yet even reached the crime scene.” There was no mockery in his tone, but rather it was all stated as it was. No concern, no pity. Just a fact, and nothing more.

“I can’t say I’m not,” Will acquiesced, albeit defensively. “No one does this because they like it, as I’m sure Jack has already told you.” It was one of Jack’s favourite speeches to new staff, no matter how experienced. Will knew his boss well enough to predict his habits. “But what I do saves lives.”

“I remember very similar sentences that made constant appearances in your letters, right before your work as a police officer almost destroyed you emotionally.” And there it was. The sting of truth, of being known so well that you could never hide behind the same walls and statements you used for the rest of the outside world. It made Will’s blood boil, as vulnerability of any calibre often did. He knew Hannibal had predicted this reaction, he just didn’t know why the Alpha insisted on this conversation happening around a crime scene, full of people from any and every department.

Will took a deep breath. “This isn’t the police force,” he began, not sure who exactly he was trying to convince. “And believe it or not, the years have changed me. What plagued me back then does not affect me the same way. I don’t let it.”

Hannibal pointedly held his gaze, challenging every bit of the statement for what it was - a lie.

“You insist on running headfirst into every opportunity that will turn you into a martyr, Will. Be careful where those opportunities will leave you.”

For a few seconds, Will just glared at Hannibal, a few colourful insults sitting on his tongue. He swallowed them, but bitterness still came out.

“And where do you propose I run instead, into your arms?” he spat, a sarcastic smile colouring his features. Hannibal, however, did not seem to find the question sarcastic at all.

“I would argue that running away from my arms is also one such decision you’ve made, much like running into the wickedness of the work you do for Jack Crawford.”

“I see what this is about,” Will laughed, an edge of hysteria in his voice. “You think I stopped writing to you as a form of- what? Self harm?”

“If that is how you like to put it, then yes, Will, I believe you did.” Hannibal’s eyes glazed over, as if he was looking at something else entirely, perhaps into the past. “You claimed you were off to pursue your happiness, to focus on your life. And yet I find you here, focusing on everyone else’s.” *Everyone but mine.*

The surety in the Alpha’s voice irritated Will, just like any other truth irritated a man who was desperate to cover it. He raised his voice, just a fraction.

“You know why I truly stopped writing to you? It wasn’t to focus on my life, obviously it wasn’t. We both saw the lie for what it was, you were just too courteous to ever bring it up. Well I’m doing you a favour and bringing it up myself. I didn’t stop writing to *harm myself*. I stopped not only because I was scared, but because I started to want what you wanted too. All these requests of yours to see each other in person, to live together, all these beautiful pictures you painted of our fates getting entangled. I started seeing it too, worse, I wished for it, I ached for it. Somewhere down the line it became all I could think about. I was terrified.”

“You were scared of wishing for a future with me. Why, Will?”

“Why? Because the moment you start wishing for something, it’s as if you’re asking fate to take it from you. I could not bear the thought of hope. I would very much rather be how I am, how I’m used to being, than be broken all over again because my silly childhood fantasy could not come true.”

Hannibal took in his words, along with the bite added to them, and seemed to almost consume them, absorb them into his very being. Will could almost see a phantom hand writing them all down, and folding them in half.

“And the way you are right now, are you happy?” the Alpha asked. Will raised his brow.

“Happy? Of course not. Have you seen me?”

“Why are you unhappy?”

“Because-” and what a question that was. Why *was* he unhappy? Because every good thing in his life he had purposefully avoided and thrown out the window, because the brightness and promise of it hurt his eyes? Surely not.

They had picked up the pace, and now Jack’s back was visible, along with some others. Hannibal did not seem to care about their presence, and he carried on, his voice lowered to a tone of privacy.

“I will tell you why, Will. You are unhappy, because that is your comfort. Even in the calmest moments of your life you are riddled with nerves, fidgeting away, causing your own discomfort, because it keeps you comfortable. You are terrified of change, even if that change is good, because it will force you to admit you have always been unhappy. You are terrified of good things in your life, because they are utterly unfamiliar to you. You are terrified of me, because you look me in the eye and you see love in its reflection and it does not fit the idea you have of yourself in your mind. You are completely, utterly terrified of being loved, that you would rather sit in your room and write letters to someone for twenty years, instead of spending your life with them, because there is a slight possibility it would make you happy.”

Each word added another brick to the building tension between Will’s temples. He brought a hand up to rub at one of them absently, as if to comfort his thoughts, to reassure them they were not visible. He wanted these words to be a revelation to him, to somehow bring him out of whatever evil spell he was under, to save him. But he was already aware of everything Hannibal was saying, so all they did was to irritate him further.

“I’ve been afraid all my life, Hannibal. How do you expect me to just stop?”

Jack Crawford was closer now. He appeared to have slowed his step, perhaps noting the tension in the two men behind him, and staying alert due to his lack of knowledge on their relationship. Hannibal seemed to not like that, casting subtle glances at the other Alpha’s back.

“I don’t expect you to do anything. All I want from you is to acknowledge that fear, and do nothing to change it. Fear also means excitement, or anticipation. It means you care about the situation you find yourself in.” he paused, slowing his step as if to emphasise his point. Or to create more distance between them and Jack. “It means you are human, Will. If you live your whole life being afraid, be afraid. But do not be afraid on your own. I am right here, Will, and I am not going anywhere.”

Whatever Hannibal expected when he said that statement, it seemingly did not include Will storming off and striding up to Jack. The Alpha’s words hung in the air, nothing for them to cling onto, except the silence. Hannibal did not increase his step again, and instead settled for staying behind and observing his Omega’s attempts at a normal conversation with his superior.

The crime scene was a recreation of the beheading of John the Baptist, the first biblically themed murder the Ripper had done since starting his work in Baltimore. Will could not take his eyes off it, could not take his eyes off the man, who was now only a head, and the woman, both of which he did not recognise. He was not sure why he was so relieved, but he did not remember a single letter he had ever written that alluded to this. He did not feel connected to it the same way he did to all the other tableaux. Yet still, it called to him. And when Jack informed them the woman was an Omega, he could not help but draw the comparison between her and himself.

Her hair was short, dark and slightly curled, her eyes were closed, though when Will closed his own he could see the same shade of green staring back in his mind’s reflection.

The story of Salome, the Jewish princess who was told she could ask for anything, and what she wanted was the head of John the Baptist.

But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."

Will looked again at the man’s decapitated head. When he closed his eyes, he saw Matthew Brown.

"Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you."

I am right here, Will, and I am not going anywhere.

The words of past conversations, of testaments and letters floated all together in his head, and for an odd, inexplicable reason, they all fit together in one corner.

The latest Ripper murder was all Will was thinking about, the feeling he had at the scene haunting him like a sinister mantra, daring him to repeat it to himself over and over. He had felt it since George Henderson, but back then it had been easier to suppress. He had not allowed it to come to the surface for long enough. It burst through his skin now, much like the bullets had burst through Hobbs. Much like Louise Hobbs' blood had burst through the entire room, covering the scene and both men with an everlasting memory of self-inflicted failure. A dying father, a dead daughter, and a mother who had failed her. And Will Graham, witnessing all of their deaths, in one way or another, and only adding to them, in the end, by shooting Hobbs when it was too late.

He was growing obsessed with this serial killer, with their ideals, their views and their *art*. He had never felt so profoundly connected to anyone he'd profiled, anyone his empathy had touched. Despite almost becoming everyone he observed, he always knew deep down that they were not him, and that he was always Will Graham. He absorbed little bits of everybody, just as any other person did, although in his case a lot more frequently and strongly. But he had never before absorbed, or even *wished* to absorb *so much* of one's lingering presence. Not since Hannibal and his letters, his words, his promises.

He was also growing obsessed with the killer partially *because* he was actively fighting against his connection to Hannibal.

With the Alpha in his life now, there was no paper to hide behind, no room to lock himself into in the gaps between questions and answers, no time to hone his words and edit every statement he made. With Hannibal there in person, every single thought, every single word had consequences, much unlike the deceptive air of freedom their distance had previously given them.

The latest Ripper murder was all Will was thinking about, because he could not bear to think about what Hannibal had told him. And how *hopeful* it had made him feel.

Matthew had visited once again after that, and he'd attempted to kiss Will, as he always did, attempted to scent him. This time, an invisible force had taken hold of the Omega's hands, Hannibal's words solidifying in his brain. *I am right here, Will, and I am not going anywhere.*

Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.

He felt himself whispering those words, while Matthew stood in front of him, to no one in particular. To the Ripper, perhaps. Or even to Hannibal. Part of Will believed that if he asked

him, Hannibal would gladly oblige and rid him of Matthew Brown. But when he imagined the Alpha doing it, the image became distorted, and instead of Matthew Brown, he saw all of the Ripper's previous victims, and Hannibal was killing them, one by one, with a neutral expression on his face. In Will's imagination, he looked calm. Like he had a purpose, and that purpose was Will Graham.

I had something calling to me here, in Baltimore. I've come to find it.

Will felt the familiar crawl on his skin, the one that always came when one was the object of Hannibal's love. Even after all these years, he had never grown used to it. But here, in the face of Matthew Brown, the threatening eternal presence of the Alpha gave Will strength, and he finally did what he'd always wanted to do. He shoved Matthew away so hard, the Beta fell back on his backside.

Matthew snarled at the sudden aggression, and responded with his own, grabbing a nearby glass and throwing it at the wall. It did not explode in a million pieces, like Will thought it would. It was rather underwhelming. The glass hit the wall, and fell down with a loud thud, solid, unbreaking, as if by a miracle. Matthew promised Will he would be back, and next time he was here, Will would be begging him to stay.

When the Beta left, Will stood in one place, the crawl on his skin still present, and he made a decision.

He called Hannibal.

"I insist you stay with me for at least the weekend, Will, for my own peace of mind," Hannibal said, his voice surprisingly gentle, no ounce of it betraying the smouldering anger beneath his skin. It didn't matter, for Will could smell it well enough. It emanated from the Alpha in waves, like a rumbling of thunder. Will felt himself eager to reach out, to soothe him, but he did not.

He'd told him about Matthew. About all of it. He couldn't hold himself back, fear or not. Hannibal's assurances had miraculously worked, his promise to be there for Will had solidified in the Omega's mind unbeknownst to him. Perhaps due to all the repetition of the words happening in his mind these past few days.

They stood in Will's living room now, Hannibal having driven over to Wolf Trap as soon as their call had ended. Will had only told him he needed him there. A challenge, perhaps, a dare. Or just a base need for a close friend's company. But as soon as the Alpha had shown up, Will had found himself wanting more, wanting the Alpha to know everything about him, like he used to, before Will began slipping away. And he'd spilled it all.

All except Hobbs, of course. That was Will's knowledge alone, and he would not do Abigail the disservice of sharing it.

By the end of his story, Hannibal was silently fuming, externally presenting the textbook image of poise and self-control. The Alpha was now crouched down by the sofa, scratching at Winston's ears. He was the only dog that had approached him, the others lay in front of the fireplace, sleeping. Will himself was sat on the sofa, trying to form a protest that sounded good enough to use. Instead, he could only look down, like a chastised child, feeling helpless.

He could not think of why he was acting like this, why he had called Hannibal in the first place, but now that he had, he did not want him to go. He did not want to protest his request at all.

"What about my dogs?" he asked instead.

Hannibal kept petting Winston, the dog slowly growing bored with the attention. "Who usually cares for them in your absence?"

"My neighbour has a farm," Will said. "If she's not available, I usually call Alana. We owe each other dog-sitting favours, though my dogs outnumber hers significantly."

Hannibal sniffled at the mention of Alana Bloom.

"Call your neighbour if you wish. It is still early enough in the afternoon to not disturb them. I hope they are not fond of siestas."

Will did call his neighbour, and she agreed to look after them. He thanked her profusely and reminded her where he kept the spare key.

Hannibal's obvious jealousy of Alana did not irritate him at all, it *pleased* him. Will felt himself growing warm at the Alpha's possessiveness. He was acting too strange, he hoped he wasn't losing his mind.

He agreed to spend the weekend with Hannibal, in the end, nothing more. The Alpha had not insisted on him being there any longer, fully aware of Will's limits.

Will pet each dog goodbye and made sure the spare key was in the right place for the neighbour to find, and made to fill up a bag with clothes for Hannibal's. The latter had already loaded another bag into his car containing Will's laptop and notes he needed for work next week. He went to the attic before he left, just to make sure the *Hannibal* labelled notebooks were still there. He half-expected them to have disappeared, turned to dust by the Alpha's appearance into reality. The drawings and folded letters felt like a fairytale, once. Now they were just extensions of the man who already existed in his life, who waited outside with the Omega's things packed safely in the trunk of his car.

Will took a drawing out of the notebook, one of a street in Paris, and put it in his pocket. For courage, he supposed.

Hannibal set up a guest room for him on the same floor as his own bedroom, and left him to his own devices, after he observed Will's skittishness. He knew the Omega needed time to settle, and if he played his cards right, it would not be the last time Will was here. He left him with instructions that dinner was to be at seven, and it would be lovely if you would join, Will, thank you.

Will, in turn, tried to distract himself with something, to ignore the fact he had just shared Matthew, the most shameful part of his life, with the one person he valued most. He pulled out his laptop and attempted to sort out his students' work, but his mind could not help but keep taking him back to his and Hannibal's conversation.

"I encouraged him sometimes, Hannibal," he had told him earlier. "I even craved his company at times. It was not abuse, it was mutual. I'm just as fucked up as he is."

But Hannibal had seen past the statement, past Will's defensiveness. He'd seen the truth of Will's helplessness, he'd seen how *ugly* it made the Omega feel. He had not remarked on it, but he had discarded all of Will's statements with a wave of his hand, and had reassured him.

"You are not a monster for craving love, Will," he had said. "Matthew is a monster for selling his violence hidden under its pretence."

Will had never seen Hannibal so worked up. It made him want to cry, here, in the middle of the guest bedroom the Alpha had offered him. Not tears of sadness, or helplessness, but tears of a realisation. He had had the chance to have this worry and this care directed at him all his life, but instead he had spent the majority of it deflecting it. It made him feel so young, now, when he'd finally allowed himself to receive it.

Now that he *did* receive it, he did not know what to do with it, had never entertained the idea enough to prepare for it. Rather, he had always prepared to avoid it, so all he could do was stand there, idly, and wait for dinner at seven.

Matthew's name was not so much as mentioned, after Will's admission, and Will was grateful for it. He'd imagined scenarios of Hannibal asking him question after question, trying to find out everything about his past relationship with the Beta, but the Alpha didn't so much as prod. He calmly served Will his dinner, doing his usual explanation of the dish which Will

listened to with interest, and sat across from him, instead of taking his usual seat at the head of the table.

They had pink wine, the sweet tanginess of it grounding Will as much as it buzzed him. They talked of the academy, of Hannibal's progress with the students, of Will's own struggles with having to mix so much of Alana's notes into his tests. They talked of Jack Crawford and his blind quest for making the world a better place, they even talked of Beverly Katz and the rest of the forensics team, discussing person after person, topic after topic. It was mostly Hannibal asking questions, throwing in observations, which would then prompt Will to bounce back his statements, to add in his own critiques, or wholeheartedly agree.

It made Will think of the first dinner they had together here, in Hannibal's house, though back then there had been a lot more tension in the air, despite less things having happened between them.

His train of thought brought him to the head of John the Baptist, and he looked at the dessert plate Hannibal was setting down in front of him, expecting to see it there. Thankfully, it was just a small bowl of what looked like rice pudding, and Hannibal helpfully supplied it was called Sütlaç. The cinnamon on top had a comforting fragrance, filling up the room rather quickly.

The dessert was warm. At one point Will had unknowingly closed his eyes and, all too vividly, imagined scooping John the Baptist's eye socket with his spoon and bringing it to his mouth, but when the milky, cinnamon taste hit his tongue, he was shaken from his fantasy.

He offered to help Hannibal wash the dishes, the wine making him a little daring and prompting him to increase his proximity to the other man. Before they started clearing things up, Hannibal put some wood in the fireplace and returned to the kitchen, his hands smelling of smoke and cinnamon. Will stopped him and brought them to his nose, scenting his wrists, a wave of calm washing over him.

Hannibal adored seeing Will indulge in acts that made him so nervous. He felt the Omega's fluttering pulse on the fingertips that grazed his wrists, he saw the blown pupils and smelled the mix of emotions in the Omega's scent. His scent was nothing like the fleeting whiffs he caught on Will's letters. It radiated off of him, aided by his body heat, and reeled him in. His letter had been nothing but lures, and now that he was finally caught in the fisherman's net, he found he did not want to go anywhere else.

His hunger for Will consumed him, and when the Omega let go of his wrists to turn to the sink, Hannibal had to take a deep breath to bring himself back in control.

At Will's insistence, the Omega washed, and Hannibal dried, almost shoulder to shoulder. With the last plate washed and thrust into Hannibal's waiting hands, Will dried off his own, and walked to the living room, moving to stand in front of the fireplace. The fire danced in front of his eyes, asking him to dance, too. He almost did, a brave streak in his mind prompting him to dare, to live.

He felt the footsteps more than he heard them, the Alpha deceptively silent as always. He let him approach, not turning, just staring at the fire, the image of it burning into his retinas,

making the room darker and darker.

Hannibal stood right behind him, his nose dangerously close to the nape of his neck. He drew a deep breath, which sent an intense shiver down Will's spine. His skin was buzzing, something unknown sizzling beneath, threatening to come to the surface.

"Let me know if any of this is too much, Will, and I will stop." Hannibal's husky voice was the only thing breaking the silence, mixing with the ambience of the crackling fire and creating poetry. After uttering that statement, Hannibal did not keep his mouth unoccupied, and Will felt lips touching the back of his neck, then one side, then the other. The Alpha's strong arms circled him from behind, landing right beneath his ribcage, gliding up and down the cotton of his shirt. Every touch was like a song, like lyrics written as an act of love. Will felt like an instrument, being played by the gentlest of musicians. He felt intoxicated. When the Alpha's hands came up to brush against his chest, Will whimpered. The mysterious thing beneath his skin sang a dangerous song, and made him turn around in Hannibal's arms.

The Alpha looked at him, the fire reflecting in his pupils, and Will acted before he could think. He fell to his knees, clumsy hands grasping at Hannibal's belt. Hannibal, who seemed both surprised and intrigued by the Omega's actions, did nothing to stop him. Rather, he encouraged him by putting a hand idly on the top of Will's head, not guiding or demanding, but affirming.

Will pulled Hannibal's trousers down enough to get to what he was looking for, and his breathing quickened. His movements were much less graceful, much less romantic than Hannibal's. He did not caress, or kiss, or embrace. He knew to do only what he had been taught about love and sex, and that was what he did.

Hannibal's cock was hard already, as if brought to life by the mere sight of Will himself, or by the charged air in the room, and Will wasted no time. He held him with one hand and brought him to his mouth, engulfing him. The hand on his hair gripped just slightly, grabbing hold of soft hair, though it still remained unmoving. Will looked up and the intensity he saw in the Alpha's returning gaze almost made him choke. He closed his eyes and swallowed him deeper.

He set up a languid pace, with no real rhythm. His movements were as frantic as his mind. He tried to focus on everything around him lest he lose himself in this one task. He felt the sting of the floorboards on his knees, the saliva running slowly down his mouth, encouraged by his movements. He wanted to wipe it with his free hand, but that one was keeping him balanced by gripping the back of Hannibal's thigh. He didn't have to, though, because as soon as he thought it, the Alpha seemed to read his mind, his own hand cupping Will's jaw and wiping it away. Smearing it was a better word for it, but it did the job. Will now focused on the warmth on his cheek, the wet warmth inside his mouth, Hannibal's cock sliding in and out of him.

The Alpha did not stay still for long, and when Will swallowed and sucked a little harder, Hannibal could not help but thrust into his mouth. The action made tears spring to Will's eyes, but he didn't pull back. Hannibal thrust in and out a few more times, his thumb smearing more saliva mixed with precum while he pet Will's jaw and cheek. He was as brutal as he was gentle, and on the final thrust, he lodged himself for a few moments deep into Will's throat, making him gag. He pulled out, then, and got on his knees and brought the hand on Will's hair down to his other cheek. He held him in place, Will breathing hard and fast, eyes half-closed, almost absent. Hannibal pulled the pocket square out of the front of his suit, and wiped at the Omega's mouth.

"Let us go slower, Will, you seem overwhelmed. Come." And he got up, taking Will's prone hand and guiding him up the stairs.

In truth, Will *was* overwhelmed. Partially because he wasn't sure what had taken over him, and partially because it was *Hannibal*. The Alpha set a fire in his insides, made him do things he'd never done with anyone else, never *wanted* to do with anyone else. In the Alpha's presence, he felt both at peace and at a battlefield. It was a dangerous combination that made him leap into things he was not ready for. He was hungry, *starving* for something, but he couldn't figure out what.

He felt his back hit something soft, and he quickly came to the awareness Hannibal had taken them to his bedroom. The Alpha followed him on the bed soon after, crawling on top of Will, his scent so intense it made Will's mind reel. Perhaps it was because he was in *Hannibal's* bedroom, where everything smelled of the Alpha. It was as if his whole being had seeped into the floorboards, bled into the curtains and the blankets. Will wanted to drink it all up until he couldn't stand. In another surge of passion, he pulled Hannibal's face close to his own, and bit into his lower lip, making the Alpha groan.

"I want you," he said, pulling back, with a confidence that wasn't his own. He was far away, again, lost in his mind. Hannibal seemed to notice, and he ignored his words for the time being, settling into his habit of taking his time. Will's clothing was gently removed, every inch of revealed skin softly kissed and sucked on, every crevice of his body deeply scented. Hannibal's hands did not seem to get enough of him. All the while the Alpha was whispering praises that did not reach Will's ears. His breathing was quickening again, his confidence slowly waning the more of himself was revealed. Before Hannibal undressed him fully, he made to remove his own suit, casting it to the side without a second glance. When both were just in their underwear, Will laying prone on his back, gazing deliriously up at Hannibal, the latter smiled, putting his hands on either side of the Omega's waist. The soft skin there fluttered from the touch.

"May I?" Hannibal asked, every bit the gentleman he always was. Will nodded jerkily, afraid to use his voice lest his nerves become more apparent than they already were.

Hannibal hooked the waistband of Will's boxers with his fingers, and slowly pulled down. Will pushed himself up on his heels to aid him, breathing quicker and quicker. His hands and feet began to tingle, little black spots began to dance in his peripheral vision. He ignored it all.

When Hannibal's mouth worked its way up his inner thigh, Will's heartbeat filled his ears, the thunder of it drowning out everything else. Then, Hannibal's tongue licked a long stripe up his cunt, and instead of moaning or whimpering, Will choked on the dryness in his throat, and he blacked out.

"Will, breathe."

What a ridiculous request, Will thought, *if anything I should be breathing a lot less*. His lungs were working at full force, the rapid breaths coming in and out, singing the red and sharp song of panic.

Will lay on Hannibal's bed, covers and blankets wrinkled and all over the place. Hannibal was sitting back on his heels at Will's thighs, concern writ on his face. Concern and understanding. Because naturally, even in his most embarrassing of moments, Hannibal understood him.

Will tried to focus on breathing slower, but it had reached a point beyond his control. He let out an involuntary whine, which barely stuttered out his chattering teeth. The sound of it made Hannibal's muscles lock up for a millisecond, and then both his hands were grabbing one of Will's own, and putting it to his heart.

"Focus on my heart, Will," he said, "Focus on my lungs. Feel my breathing." And he took in a slow, deep breath, held it in, and released it. It did little the first few times, but as he kept going, he gradually found Will's hand against his chest shaking less and less, his hyperventilation ebbing little by little, replaced by tiny, exhausted whines.

With each whine Hannibal could not help himself but utter *shh* 's, and *it's alright's* in the beats of silence, between his own deep breaths. Soon, all sound faded, and it was just the two men, gazing calmly, one at the ceiling, the other at the love of his life. No erratic heaving remained, just soft inhales and exhales.

Hannibal did nothing to break the silence, did not even dare to let go of Will's hand, still held against him, as if that was his only tether to Will and the only contact he would be allowed with him for the rest of their lives.

He treated every touch from Will that way, the latter realised. Even the fleeting shoulder-to-shoulder contact at work, or the reluctant handshake Will himself had initiated at one staff meeting. Hannibal had looked elated in those moments, almost frozen in time. As if, even as it was happening, he was repeating the moment over and over in a faraway reality, making sure he never forgot it. Now, with Hannibal's slow, grounding heartbeats vibrating against the palm of his hand, Will felt like he was holding the entirety of him. And he would not let go.

"Go ahead," Will's words broke the tentative silence, "ask me."

Hannibal, to his credit, wasted only a few seconds pretending he didn't know what Will was talking about. The latter squeezed a little with his hand, pretending that he was scooping Hannibal's heart out.

"You have never had sex before." He didn't ask. He didn't have to. The statement was enough on its own. They both knew the answer, so there was no room for a question.

"I'm not a virgin, technically." Will was quick to add that part in. Almost too quick, like he'd been waiting for the punchline, words fermented on his tongue, ripe and ready to be repeated. Hannibal wondered how many times he'd actually told someone else that. What were the odds he himself was the first to hear it? That Will had fabricated that story in his letter years ago just so he could tell him?

"Matthew?" the question was a loaded one, but clear in itself. *Did Matthew assault you?*

"Not in this way, no," Will quickly corrected. "Matthew was never interested in sex, and I wasn't either, at least with him. He was much more entertained by the idea of *having* an Omega, not *fucking* one." The crudeness of the statement made Hannibal's mouth tighten, but the tension in the rest of his body eased with the new knowledge.

"I could hazard a guess, then, and say you did not lose your virginity to someone else."

"And you would be correct," with that, Will's hand finally slid down Hannibal's chest, reaching the top of his stomach before it retracted back to Will's own torso, pressing it against his ribs as if to steal and preserve the warmth. "Go ahead, psychoanalyse me. I may not be used to your facial expressions, but I can still read you as easily as one of your letters, Hannibal. I'll allow it this time, because I owe you some grace, after whatever just happened."

Hannibal revelled in the opportunity he was given, so much so he took his time picking his next words carefully. By the time he'd decided what to say, the memory of Will's touch on his heart was but a cold whisper.

"We've talked about control many times in our past correspondence," he began at last. Will couldn't help but smirk at the mention of their letters. They'd always been something so private, rarely shared with people from his life. Hearing it with his own ears, albeit from Hannibal himself, sent an unexpected wave of pleasure each time. Like he was discussing something forbidden, something so private it bordered on magic, on the supernatural. He thought of the street in Paris, tucked away safely in his pocket. A reminder his past was as real as his present.

"Oh yes, many times. And all of these times I've annotated just how much I hate the concept of control."

"Because you think of it too often."

"Exactly. I'm taught to think of it, to remember it. Remember just how easily it can be given to or taken from me."

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away," murmured Hannibal, eyes looking at the crown of Will's head. "Job whispers that as he accepts all his family taken from him, everything in his life destroyed by the hand of the God he has devoted his life to."

"There is no God who took it all away from me. I did all that on my own."

"It is a rather godly trait, to exercise control in your day-to-day life, don't you think?"

"If that's true, then by that logic you're calling yourself the God of this universe," scoffed Will.

Hannibal, however, seemed eager to jab right back. "You are obsessed with control, Will," he reminded, as if he needed to at all. "Much more than I am. More accurately, you are obsessed with not giving it away to the undeserving, which I would argue to you is the rest of the world."

Another statement, the time for playful questions having come to an end. Hannibal was probing now, in a way he did when he was waiting to hear one specific thing, to steer the conversation to the topic he wanted to discuss. Will was painfully familiar with this trait of his - in their letters, it was far easier to deal with, more subtle. He had days, weeks to process and think about the topic changes and discussions. In real life, he was put on the spot. The fight had left him by that point, expelled by the sudden wave of panic he'd endured mere minutes ago. He did what his heart and soul told him to do. He gave in.

"I took my own virginity with toys when I was twenty," he relented. Hannibal did not smile triumphantly at the admission, nor did he react in any discernible way, other than a slight refocusing of his eyes. "I was appalled at the idea of giving it to someone else."

Dear Hannibal,

How is the season treating you? You mentioned your family's love for old traditions, and I heard from Ms Rosa that courting season has started in France. I wondered if that extended to Italy, too. Any prospective mates in Florence? (I hope the answer is no. It would be too boring if you suddenly decided to take a mate. Who would I send all these letters to?)

Jokes aside, I went on a double date today. Another Omega from college asked me to go with her, she introduced me to a Beta from a science major. She was with an Alpha. Me and the Beta (Frank) were left alone at some point, and he started to ask me really odd questions.

It all ended pretty fast, when I told him I'm not a virgin. He made up an excuse and left almost immediately. I waited for my college friend to come back so I could let her know I didn't feel well, and I almost cried on my way home.

Ridiculous, right? I always tell you how little I care for what those "pure Omega" obsessed people think, and yet when their thoughts are aimed at you, they're so incredibly hard to brush off. Sometimes I feel like they burrow themselves beneath my skin, leaving me feeling dirty. Appalled by my own self.

I'm glad I'm not a virgin, though. Imagine the stress of having someone like that believe that my virginity belongs to him. I shudder to think.

The concept of virginity in modern society had changed in many ways, morphed with every generation into something new, ideas of past beliefs clinging to its essence, but not being able to stop it from changing, from evolving.

For Omegas, unfortunately, the past was vastly more defining than for other genders. An Omega's virginity was no exception. The mere concept of what an Omega was and should be was so deeply connected to puritanical beliefs and values, that to reject it, one was to reject society itself.

Hannibal had always wondered why Will was so careful to share this piece of information about himself in such a roundabout way. Despite Hannibal himself going into detail about many of his pursuits and relationships with Will, the latter had never even mentioned a name for whoever it was he'd spent his first time with. But now it made sense. Even back then, Will was testing him, testing them both. He was curious to see Hannibal, the traditionalist, react to Will being "defiled".

When Hannibal had barely mentioned it afterwards, and steered the conversation towards his own courting escapades, neither man had mentioned that part of Will's letter again.

It had been a foolish letter, one that Will regretted more and more as he grew up. He resented himself for writing it, partly resented Hannibal for reading it and wished he could erase his memories.

He had been barely twenty at the time, the naivete of youth still clinging to his skin, urging him to explore his boundaries and surroundings. That letter had been a combination of all that, an ugly trivialisation of his status in society, of his worth and past. None of that had been meant to be written down or shared.

After he had posted it, Will realised why it had made him feel so empty.

That letter was a plea, a cry for help in a reality that didn't exist. He wanted Hannibal to know all that, because he wanted Hannibal to erase it all. And he resented both the Alpha and

himself, because it could never be so.

"Did the action of taking your own virginity free you?"

"How do you mean?" Will fiddled with the irritated skin around his nails. He heard Hannibal's throat click as he swallowed, like a light switch in the dim-lit room.

"Did it bring you pleasure to do so?"

The question startled Will, as many of Hannibal's questions often did, and made him pull on a loose piece of skin on his thumb a little too hard. A drop of blood welled up almost immediately. How thematic, he thought.

"I used to believe it did. But that belief quickly faded away, as soon as the bleeding stopped." He put the bleeding thumb in his mouth, eyes looking up at Hannibal.

"As far as I was concerned, that particular event was never about pleasure."

"What was it about, then?" prompted Hannibal. There was no urgency to his questions, no probing perversion. It was as if they were discussing the weather, and not Will fucking himself in his youth.

Will put his thumb to his lips one last time, smearing the blood and saliva with his skin. When he pulled back his hand, the air caressed at the sore appendage, kissing it far more gently than Will could ever be to himself.

"It was about erasing a novelty," Will admitted, eyes clouding over with the lonely memory of his room. "Sex to me was always about control, about losing it. I was so fearful of it I could not let anyone do that to me, so I endeavoured to ensure I brought myself my own pleasure. Instead, I only brought myself what I feared most.

"I turned sex into a tool, a means to an end. Even by my own hand, I was defiled, not liberated. There was no pleasure in the room that day, only the cold precision of making sure I got things right.

"It was painful. I made a mess of the bed, bled all over the mattress," the next sentence made him laugh at the sheer absurdity of it: "I punched myself in the nose a few times to make Dad believe it was all from a nosebleed."

Hannibal made a sound, an unnecessary reassurance that he was listening. In the beat of silence that followed, Will finally looked up at him. There was a cloud of reminiscence misting over Hannibal's eyes, as if he was remembering the event of Will's first time just as vividly as Will was. Eventually, he spoke again. A final thought, carefully woven by his interpretation of the relayed events.

"So the loss of your virginity, even by your own hand, was something that was done to hurt you, and not bring you relief."

Will smiled, nodding in melancholy: "In my avoidance of getting hurt, I hurt myself."

"Having known you for so many years, dear Will, I could safely say you do that more often than you are aware."

"Oh, I'm plenty aware of my habits, believe you me."

"We humans are rarely known to be gentle with ourselves. Often our natural revulsion to others is borne of the fact our only frame of reference is our own self-treatment."

"So I was never just scared of some big bad Alpha who would use me, I was just scared of myself?"

Will looked down at his thumb, which suddenly felt wet again. In his fiddling, he had reopened the small wound. Some of the blood had dripped down on the sheets.

Hannibal's gentle hand came under Will's wrist, grasping at it softly. "You made sure to avoid any unnecessary trauma from your first sexual experience by creating the trauma yourself."

The statement hurt, only because it was sharp. And it was sharp, only because it was accurate.

"At least I was in control of how I got it," Will deflected.

Hannibal's eyes flitted down to the single spot of blood on the pale sheets.

"At least."

Silence returned again. Hannibal's hand warmed Will's palm, the surface where they were touching growing damp with perspiration.

"I don't think I want to have sex today, Hannibal."

Hannibal smiled. "I don't think you do, either."

A beat.

"Are you disappointed?"

The smile grew. Hannibal brought their entwined hands to his chin, close to his mouth. Not quite touching. "Irrelevant question, Will. I am content. I cannot be disappointed in something that does not exist."

Will furrowed a brow, eyes on Hannibal's chin. "Sex with me doesn't exist?"

"Not at this precise moment, no."

Will felt thousands of tiny legs crawling on his skin. He suppressed a shudder, and huffed a breath. "Alright, I'll pretend that makes sense."

"May I?" the question was sudden, not quite fitting the line of their conversation. Without even thinking, without wondering what it was that Hannibal asked permission for, Will just nodded. It came naturally.

Hannibal finally brought Will's thumb to his lips, the blood on it mostly dry, some of it still fresh. He did not lick it clean, or put it in his mouth. He merely placed a soft kiss on Will's nail bed, and finally let his hand go.

The action was so unexpected, just as the question had been, and yet it felt so fitting, as if Will had been waiting for it his entire life. It reminded him of that day in the lecture room, when Hannibal had put mint candy in his hand. The tingling sensations all over his body focused just on the tip of his finger, and he felt like he could break at any second.

Hannibal moved to stand from the bed. "I will bring you a band aid, if you like."

"Can you hold me for a while?" Will stuttered out before he could stop himself. "The band aid can wait, it'll stop bleeding in a minute."

The statement surprised them both. It was as if Hannibal's kiss to his fingertip had travelled up his arm, snaked around his throat and settled on his tongue, sending involuntary words out of his mouth. Only Will wished they were involuntary, as it would mean he had nothing to do with what followed.

But what followed was, again, just simple, soft acceptance. An exhale of bated breath and a quiet *of course*.

They sat there, legs tangled with the covers, Will half-lying chest to chest on Hannibal's torso, Hannibal's back to the headboard. Will's cheek was resting on the Alpha's shoulder, the cold tip of his nose touching his neck. After his embarrassing pre-sex panic attack, all shame had seemingly left his body, and he openly scented the other man. His best friend. His penpal for the past twenty years. Twenty years was a whole lifetime. More than half of his life Will had spent getting to know this man. And it was not him that sent him into panic, it was Will himself. It was always Will at the center of Will's life. No one else. The thought was just as suffocating as it was a comfort.

Hannibal talked to him, warm fingers rubbing his back. Up and down, up and down. Occasionally, one of his hands would ghost at the nape of his neck, touch so feather soft Will felt he was imagining it all. When Hannibal finally moved to card his hands through Will's hair, the latter let out a soft whimper, almost a groan. The type of groan you let out when you're getting a really good massage, when decades of tension is leaving your body at someone else's touch.

Hannibal wanted to kiss the top of Will's head. So he did just that. At the contact, Will put some of his weight on his arms and raised his head to align their faces. For a moment, they looked at each other. At the people they'd become, both grown up together, yet apart from each other, all this time. By Will's design. Will's control.

Will's eyes grew misty, and one of Hannibal's hands moved from his hair to his cheek, to softly rub at the sparse beard growing on it.

"I will kiss you now," said Will, grinning at his own words, as if it wasn't obvious what he was about to do.

"Go ahead," was all Hannibal could manage to get out, before their lips touched. Not quite collided. There was no violence in it, no forcefulness. The action was so foreign to Will in its innocence, that he had no time to be worried about it.

It was soft, at least as soft as Will could manage. Lost in the newness of it, the unfamiliarity of it, he pressed his hand a little too hard onto Hannibal's sleeve. The blood returned.

He let it flow, and Hannibal didn't seem to mind. His nostrils flared.

The kiss lasted half a second, the next lasted two or three. Hannibal lay there, letting Will kiss him softly over and over, not quite escalating it, not quite relenting. Eventually, Will's arms grew sore from holding himself up, and he slumped back down on Hannibal's torso.

"I think my heat is coming," Will admitted, the statement surprising even himself. Hannibal tensed for a millisecond beneath him, but soon relaxed once again.

"What do you plan to do when it comes?" he asked, no hope or assumption evident in his question.

"Nothing," Will sighed, trying not to think about it too much. "I'll probably go home. I'll call you if I need anything, though." That seemed to be enough for the Alpha. As long as he was considered as part of Will's heat, no matter how small, he was fine with it. Whatever happened between them this evening was proof enough that speed would not take them anywhere nice.

They fell asleep, listening to each other's heartbeats.

[January 2nd 19XX]

Happy New Year, Hannibal!

Sorry for not writing during the holidays. I had an unexpected heat, it was very painful. Dad had to call Ms Rosa in the middle of the night because he didn't know what to do. I spent a few nights at theirs. Her daughter would distract me by clacking the pink beads in her braids. Ms Rosa had some good medicine for the pain, and gave me some tea. Dad looked very ashamed when he came to pick me up. I don't know if he was ashamed

of me, or of himself. I hope it's not of me. Ms Rosa didn't seem to mind helping out, but I get why it makes dad uncomfortable.

He always wanted an Alpha son. He doesn't admit it, though. I guess it's something from the way he was raised, maybe he doesn't even realise it.

I'm spending next weekend at Ms Rosa's to help with their chores as a thanks. Opal went back to her dad's, but I'll wait for her to come back to thank her for letting me use her bed.

It hit him the day after, of all things.

He had assumed he had at least a week before he was due, and had planned to go to Quantico in person to let Jack and Alana know of his impending absence. Evidently, none of that would be happening, he realised as he clutched at his abdomen, hunched over on the cold porcelain of the toilet lid. A cramp crawled all the way up to the back of his neck, making him whine softly and seek to cover his throat.

It was hell. It was absolute hell. He could not leave Hannibal's house now. He knew the Alpha enough to guess he would not be allowed to even move without assistance. In their letters, heats were always something Will brought up, Hannibal's upbringing too insistent on keeping taboo topics out of any polite conversation, that Will was sure his treatment of them would be much the same - traditional.

His hormone-muddled brain didn't seem to mind the idea, in fact all of a sudden it sounded so appealing Will wanted nothing to do but to whine for his Alpha and snuggle in his arms. The thought was so stark in its difference from Will's usual destructive stream of consciousness that came with the pain of his heats, that it startled him into an actual whine. The sound echoed through the dark blue walls of the guest bathroom, bringing an eerie quiet in its wake. Will hadn't realised how quiet it had been up until it wasn't.

When his legs began to fall asleep, he forced himself to get up and huddle back to the bed. He wasn't quite sure why he always rushed to the bathroom whenever he felt his heat beginning. It was a habit formed years ago, perhaps sprung upon him by the inherent thought of his hormonal cycle being something shameful, something he *had* to hide from the rest of the world. And the best place to hide, evidently, was the bathroom.

Just as Will made to raise the covers, which had by then lost all the warmth of his now-forgotten sleep, he heard a soft knock on the door. "Will?" he heard being whispered on the other end. Before he could reply, the door cracked open a fraction, and an audible intake of breath followed.

"You're in heat."

Will's cheeks pinkened, and he hurried to bury himself beneath the duvet. Anything to block Hannibal from smelling it on him. His efforts were futile, he knew, but his shame was greater than his logic.

"I told you it was coming," he whispered back. The darkness and the quiet made it impossible to raise his voice, lest he awaken the rest of the world and alert it of his presence.

Hannibal hovered at the door, his silhouette shaped by the soft glow of a light coming from another room somewhere in his house. Will squinted his eyes and pretended he was in fact a ghost, come to haunt him and drag him down to hell, to show him how men suffered, and how he would soon suffer also.

"May I come in?"

The question broke his short-lived fantasy, and Will nodded, before he realised Hannibal could not see the action. He uttered a *yes*, muffled by the pillow, which hid half of his face. He closed his eyes.

Hannibal's scent hit his nose seconds before the bed dipped, and Will felt a warm weight on his thigh. It was the Alpha's hand.

Will knew what followed. His brain supplied him with all the stories, all the traditions, all he had ever heard about heats and Alphas and Omegas. He could not say he was prepared, but then again no one ever was, the first time it happened. He did what he was taught to do, what he'd avoided all his life. He let nature take its course. The fever of his heat overcame him, and his consciousness slipped just a fraction, Omegan instincts coming to the front. He whined again, though this time it sounded far-off, as if it came from another room, or another house. He let go.

Hannibal noticed two things almost as soon as he sat down on the guest bed. One, Will was alarmingly hot to the touch, and two, he was unresponsive. Whatever awareness he had left to agree to Hannibal entering the room was gone as soon as he'd closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Hannibal felt like it was an entirely different being staring at him, and not Will himself. The whine that followed was filled with need, the sound making the Alpha's blood boil and his teeth itch uncomfortably in his mouth.

Hannibal knew he had two choices. If he followed his nature, there would hardly be any consequence in the immediate aftermath. Will was no fool, he was aware of Hannibal's biology as well as his own. He had come to his house, half-tricked by his brain to go to the Alpha he trusted most, and he was more than aware of the consequences that would follow. Hannibal could indeed take advantage of the situation and walk away unscathed. Will would not hold it against him, and would only blame himself, as he had always done.

He let himself let out a growl at the delicious opportunity presented to him. His Will, his Omega, in his arms on a silver platter. Unable to refuse him. As if the stars of their lifelines had aligned to bring them to this moment. To bring him to Hannibal.

The Omega held no fear, like this. No paranoid thoughts crossed his beautiful features, no dread from the future, no hesitation. Only open need, and desire.

Hannibal indulged in one long sniff at Will's throat, darting out a tongue to lick at the warm skin. He moved up to Will's face, and placed a petal-soft kiss on his lips. His teeth ached, eager to bite, eager to taste.

At another moan from Will, Hannibal forced himself to pull back, not quite able to swallow back a responding purr.

He knew the first choice was never something he would make, not after years of wait. The opportunity was a deceiving one, and no amount of manipulation would stop Will from running away from him eventually, should he do this. Caressing his Omega's fevered cheek, he ran his fingers through sweat-damp hair and solidified the decision he had made the moment he scented Will at his doorstep. He stood from the bed and, ignoring the pitiful whining behind him, went to the guest bathroom to prepare a hot bath.

Will's consciousness came to him in glimpses. Pleasantly scented warmth engulfing him, soft fabric sliding on his skin, flavorful broth being fed to him in tiny sips. Each time Will made a sound, he would wake just a little, as if startled by himself, but then any awareness he'd gained was lost just as fast, and he would slide back into the fuzziness of his brain. Not once did he feel afraid, or hurt, or threatened. Despite his lack of control, his body seemed to be convinced he was safe, and where he was meant to be. His brain had no power to argue, at the time.

It felt like a sickness, much like what happened to him after Hobbs. The encephalitis.

When he finally woke up, he was trapped. Awareness caught up to him, bringing along his self-preservation instincts, and he felt a scream build up in his throat at the sensation of something unknown pinning him down. The scream quickly died down, though, and was replaced by relief, then confusion, then realisation.

Hannibal Lecter, his pen-pal of more than twenty years, had enfolded him in his arms, half of his body covering Will's, and he was asleep.

Will looked at the strands of hair being weighed down by gravity, the Alpha's face so close he seemed almost distorted, and he tried to remember what had happened after his panicked trip to the bathroom. With his consciousness back to him now, he found he actually remembered most of it, albeit muddled and heavily scattered. And what he remembered

brought involuntary tears in his eyes. Not quite enough to spill down his cheeks, but enough to sting.

He remembered Hannibal lifting him up, drawing him a bath. He remembered the Alpha's soft voice, narrating his every action, whispering soothing reassurances, shushing every sound of discomfort. Each time Will had reached out for him, had whined in what could only be described as wanton need, Hannibal had instead just held him close, and nothing more. Will remembered more than one bath, more than one occasion where he was fed, and most consistently of all, he remembered Hannibal's voice, Hannibal's scent, in every single moment. Not a single memory held only Will himself, alone in a room, or cold.

His heats had never been quite like this, for as long as he lived. They had always been painful, dizzying, yes, but always so strikingly present. He always felt every single cramp, every single burst of need, like a screeching heat on his skin. He learned from a young age why they called them heats. Even when his mind succumbed to his instincts, he was always half-awake, awake enough to feel the emptiness of it, the loneliness of it. His hormones screaming at him, begging him to do something, to rid them of his solitude. He never could, not quite. The only time he truly lost consciousness was when he would faint from the pain the cramps gave him. The only warmth he ever felt during those moments was of the blankets he surrounded himself with, recycling his body heat.

He wanted to believe it was Hobbs' doing, that a residue of the encephalitis was now affecting his biology, and would do so for the rest of his life, regardless of his surroundings.

He forced himself to admit that it was not Hobbs, because he had had heats after, and they had been much the same as the ones before. It was Hannibal, not Hobbs. Hannibal was changing him, moulding his biology into something new. His body, unbeknownst to him, had made his decision for him. He had found his Alpha.

For the first time in perhaps years, Will Graham had no energy to argue with himself, and he felt too warm, too comfortable, too *loved*, to fight it. He closed his eyes, Hannibal's warmth and scent washing over him like a soft blanket. The Alpha was purring, eyelids closed, eyes moving in a rapid rhythm below them. He was dreaming. Will felt a stab of jealousy, aided perhaps by his still-present heat. He wanted Hannibal's dreams to be his own, too, to belong to him. He wanted to unfold them, read them like a long-lost letter, and reply to them in turn.

Instead, he closed his eyes in tandem, and attempted to join him.

Fate

Chapter Notes

Will confronts the Ripper.

TW for this chapter: mentions of animal death (in a past letter), and again usual Hannibal gorey stuff.

There was always an eerie silence the first few seconds of arriving at a crime scene. Jack Crawford was deeply familiar with it, it was the few seconds of silence he never took for granted. After the initial shock of it, one quickly adapted to the chatter that was happening around all the gore. The clicking of cameras, the distributing of gloves, the scribbling of names, badges and time stamps. Officers discussing the body and laughing, as if talking about the weather over a cup of tea - their own way of coping with the job. Jack sneered at it, every time, no matter how many years he'd been in the field.

Will was still in the car, his head propped on his hands, elbows resting on tired knees. Jack knew better than to ask him if he was doing okay. He was acutely aware Will was close to his breaking point. He did as he always had done, and turned to face the other way. He moved to the woman with the board of names, and signed his own. Will would come out eventually, and business would go as usual.

There was a finality to this one, Jack felt it as soon as he saw the body. He may not have possessed the same insight Will did, but he was no fool when it came to obvious hints.

The man stood propped against a tree, his arms tied on a long wooden plank, resting on his shoulders. The plank, as well as the man's feet, was nailed to the trunk. Long, deep gashes snaked through the man's forearms, from wrist to inner elbow. Thick, dried lines of blood ran down his pale skin, dark patches of it visible on the grass below.

"He crucified him," came Beverly's helpful insight. Jack merely turned his head towards her and gave a solemn nod. He did, indeed, crucify him.

Price came up to join them, pulling at one of his gloves. "These things always catch on my arm hair, what a world," he exclaimed, then saw the tension on his boss' eyebrow and quickly cast his eyes down. "What do you think, Jack?" Jimmy asked, finally stepping next to them both. "The Ripper?"

Jack Crawford took a deep breath, the smell of death and decay and every single person present, Alpha, Omega, and Beta, entering his senses and reminding him of the living. "Most likely," he admitted. "We're waiting for Will's opinion, but I'm willing to bet on it."

“I’m willing to bet it’s the last one, too,” Beverly declared. “I mean, what can you do after copying Jesus himself? It’s too big of a declaration.”

“Since when are you a profiler?” Zeller snorted, making everyone turn around in mild surprise. “Yes, I’ve been here this entire time guys, thanks for noticing.”

“I think we’re rather busy admiring the body of Christ,” Jimmy retorted.

“Alright, that’s enough fooling around,” came Jack’s authoritarian remark. “Back to work.”

“I’m waiting for Will,” Katz said, Jimmy and Zeller both nodding along. “He asks us not to touch before he sees, you do too, Jack. Can’t go back to work before he’s here.”

“Speak of the devil,” murmured Zeller, and the statement sent a shiver down Jack’s spine. Just as he shook it off, Will Graham appeared in his peripheral vision, shoulders hunched, as if he was trying to guard his ribcage, or perhaps the heart beneath it. He walked a few steps forward, passing his colleagues like a breeze, neither of which even attempting to greet him. They just watched.

Matthew Brown, Will’s ex, stood before him, crucified like the son of God himself.

Time had stopped as soon as Will had walked out of Jack’s car. There was a ticking going off in his mind, one that felt eternal and damning. Like the seconds between your head being chopped off and you realising you are dead.

Will moved as close as he could without being yelled at for contaminating the scene. He could smell Matthew’s blood, as if it were fresh. He could almost see his eyes, grey with a tint of brown as he remembered them, sparkling and reflecting the life that had left him. He sneered in Will’s mind’s eye, and wept in tandem. It was simultaneously too much to see, and not enough.

For years Will had fantasised of this, of witnessing it, of doing it, of *making* it happen. All his choices, all his decisions and all his words had led them both to this moment: Matthew dead and nailed to a tree, and Will triumphant and alive. The juxtaposition of their souls, which Will had believed for the longest time were intertwined by fate, now unrecognisable in their stark differences. Will was never a hawk, he realised. Matthew had lied to him. Will was a wolf, hiding amongst sheep, thinking himself out of place and weak, only because his sharp teeth didn’t allow him to graze the grass like his peers. And Matthew was a fly, swatted down by a god whose hand was all-too-familiar and dear.

There was no excuse, no need to deny what Will knew from the first time he laid eyes on the body of George Henderson.

Hannibal Lecter was the Ripper.

Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.

Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.

When Jack drove them back to Quantico, Will excused himself and vomited in the bathroom.

Hannibal Lecter was the Chesapeake Ripper. His pen pal of twenty-plus years was a murderer. Just like Matthew, just like Will himself. The more he let the information settle in his brain, the dizzier he felt. His mouth salivated with a new wave of nausea and he stood there, hunched over the toilet bowl, waiting for someone else to walk in and break the spell.

Hannibal Lecter had killed Matthew Brown for him.

I think I was created for violence. I think I was bred for it, I belong to it.

He had written a letter, long ago, telling Hannibal of his unbroken connection to violence. Those were the ramblings of a hopeless young man, seeking to latch onto whatever negative part of his life was the latest, seeking to make sense of the world surrounding him. He had believed, back then, that he was doomed to a violent life, he had believed he sought it, that it sought him in turn, and would chase him to the ends of the world.

Nothing in his life had proven him wrong except for Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal, the serial killer.

The alpha he fell in love with, had been in love with arguably since the first letter he received.

Every carefully constructed belief he had built with the help of Hannibal's love and adoration was crumbling before him, spilling out of him into the toilet bowl, aided by his never-ending dry heaving.

Eventually, someone did walk in, and Will was forced to flush the toilet and get himself together. When he was washing his hands and face, he looked in the mirror before him, tried to meet his own eyes. His eye sockets looked hollow, his skin almost translucent, like he was a walking corpse connected to strings on the ceiling. The hand that moved him usually had disappeared, leaving him alone, so alone. He tried to move on his own, and managed to get back to his office.

Jack Crawford would find out about his connection to Matthew soon enough. Will knew he had limited time before the questions came, the questions that would doom either him, or Hannibal. Or both of them. He wondered if things could get worse for him than they already were. His breaking heart could not fathom it.

Suddenly, the all too familiar head of John the Baptist made an appearance in his mind's eye once again, this time bringing back an almost faded memory alongside it like a crash of thunder. Will's eyes shot open, heartbeat increasing at the possibility of another clue. Another hint at the inevitable that had been right under his nose. He haphazardly finished whatever notes he had been jotting down for the report for Jack, and slammed his laptop shut.

The notebook lay open on the dusty workbench, where he'd left it the last time he'd looked through it, the day he went to Hannibal's house for the weekend. The day he'd told him about Matthew.

He flipped through the pages, then when he didn't find it, he fished out another, then a third, flipping page after page, lacking the usual grace with which he handled Hannibal's creations. The more pages he went through, the more his memory caught up to him, whispering to him about long-forgotten stories of the past, promising him parisian streets and italian galleries. His finger caught on a page then, and stopped, because he knew that once he turned it, he would see it. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and turned the page at last, greeted by a sight he very much expected.

It was a sketch of Bernardino Luini's *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*, as the cursive writing just below it suggested. It was dated back exactly ten years. Will peeled off the tape that held it to the page, which tore some of the paper away with it, and turned it around gently, revealing the writing at the back.

Dear Will,

I have dearly missed the presence of your writing on my desk. There has been an invisible force, pulling me, as always, in the direction of the pen and paper, and I have been eager to fill pages upon pages with words, just so you could read them and think of me. It is strange how one can miss another so deeply, when they have never been close enough to feel each other's absence.

I feel your absence like an open wound in my chest. It hurts from every movement I make, it reopens at every new place I visit. I wonder daily how to dull the ache.

I sat at the Uffizi again this afternoon, much like I always do when I get the time, and I happened upon a painting I've been favouring, this time lacking the usual crowd surrounding it. I could not help but sketch it for you, on the piece of paper I am now using to write on.

There are many variants of this painting Luini did, and I believe one of them hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts today. If you are able to someday locate it, using my sketch as a clue, perhaps this will bring us closer together, even just in spirit.

I sit at the Uffizi nearly every day, and I hope dearly to soon show you every bit of the treasure the Medici have curated in Florence.

Perhaps one day I, too, will be able to present to you a gift as valuable and as grand as the one Salome received. And maybe when the day comes, the event will be depicted for centuries, in variants, all across the world, for all eyes to see.

Yours,

Hannibal

Will had regrettably never gone to Boston to look for the piece. He had received the letter in a hectic part of his life, in a time where his studies had just about finished, and he had been thrust into the world of law enforcement. He had looked at the sketch on the back of Hannibal's letter, had read his beautiful words bordering on poetry, and had once again convinced himself he did not belong in the picture the Alpha was painting. He'd stacked it away quickly, trapped it in-between the ever-filling pages of the *Hannibal* labelled notebooks, and had slowly but surely forgotten all about it. Until now.

He had half a mind to drive all the way to Boston now, to attempt to fulfil some sort of prophecy Hannibal had written for both of them years ago. But that would not make the imminent confrontation any easier.

He realised, then, that he did not need to go to Boston at all. Because Hannibal had brought the piece to him, instead, in the form of two corpses, in a field.

His heart ached, he felt like a hole had been stabbed through his chest, his burning organs exposed to the air. He thought of every letter he had ever received, every sketch and every drawing, each and every one riddled with bloody fingerprints.

The phantom of Hannibal's gentle hands caressing his skin eased into his mind, making the ache unbearable. Even now, he craved that touch more than anything. His Omegan instincts cried at him, cried at his crushed state, and begged him to go to his Alpha, despite him being the source of all his problems.

"Dad, what do I do?" a tear rolled down his cheek, wetness clogging up his throat.

He held the letter with the drawing close to his chest, crumpling the paper, his clammy hands smudging the ink and the graphite. When he could finally breathe again, he put the letter back in the notebook, and grabbed a cardboard box, filling it up.

He set a fire in the hearth downstairs, and he burned everything Hannibal had ever sent him.

He settled for playing the fool, a role that was comfortable for him, as it stripped him of the responsibility of knowledge he had too much of.

He called Hannibal, frantic and worried, and relayed what happened with Matthew in a worried tone. “He told me he’d been getting into trouble,” Will cried. “He said they were after him, I thought he meant the cops, but maybe it was someone else. I should’ve told someone, Hannibal, he was as much a danger to himself as he was to anyone else. I should have told someone.”

“Hush, Will, this is not your fault. Please listen to me,” Hannibal’s soothing voice worked wonders on his nerves, even if they were falsely put on for show. Will allowed himself to act a little calmer, breathe a little slower, though he still let out a hiccup or two. “Do you want me to be there with you, Will? Tell me and I will be there.”

Will’s eyes shone in the dim light of the attic, Salome’s secretive smile flashing conspiratorially at him.

“Please,” he whispered. He did not have to force his voice to break. It did so on its own.

Dear Hannibal,

I remember when I had my first dog, when I was six years old. It’s one of my earliest memories, playing in the grass with her. She was as big as me, the first time I saw her I was terrified. Dad brought her home and she ran straight at me. I remember my body freezing in place, telling me to run, but locking me in fear. She jumped at me then, and I fell on my ass. It probably hurt, but I only remember laughing.

I was so afraid she would eventually die. It was all I ever thought about. I played with her every day, walked and fed her together with Dad, caught fish for her. And in the back of my mind, all those days, was the fact that I would live longer than her, and I would have to witness her death. A morbid thought for a child, I don’t really remember who or what put that idea into my head. But each time I thought of it, I would freeze up in fear, my stomach would grow cold, and I would just stand or lay there, with that thought in my head, trying desperately to come up with a solution to it, to hack it, somehow, to make it untrue. I could not fathom or imagine a reality where I would be alive when she was dead. It consumed me.

When she eventually died, I was fifteen. I never told you, because I never told anyone. But she did die, and I kept living. And there was a hole in my chest, and no matter how much I cried my tears couldn’t fill it. I would torture myself with memories of our games,

of the feeling of her coarse fur against the palm of my hand, of the sound of her excited barking, or her playful bites on the sleeves of my shirts. Memories hurt the most when you know they will never be repeated.

But I lived. And the fear of her death was suddenly gone, because it had happened. And there was nothing I could do about it. Now I remember her, and I hardly cry.

My fear dictates my whole life, but oftentimes it seems it leads me nowhere. I spent all these years with Calypso with fear in the back of my mind, instead of only love, and it tainted me. I blamed myself for it for so long.

I'm writing to you today to tell you that Harvey died, one of your favourites. You have a picture of him, I believe. He was just fine last week, did not stop for a break during his walks at all. Dad and I were excited about his sudden surge of energy, we thought he was finally feeling like a young dog again. It's unpredictable, how old age hits them.

I cried just as hard when Harvey died, as I had for Calypso. I held him and we buried him in the woods nearby, deep so nothing will dig him out. Dad didn't say a word, but I heard him cry when he thought I was asleep.

Death is always so quiet, even the sorrow that follows it is quiet, no matter how loud we scream. It's always the time before it, that's the loudest. It's when we fear it coming, when we think of its inevitability. But when it eventually comes, all of that is suddenly for nothing.

Something dies, or someone. And the rest of us live on. And we fear the next, until it finds them, too.

I wait patiently for the day death is no longer a fear in the back of my mind. Until I no longer try to bargain for ways to remove it, to delay it. But now, I settle for those quiet moments, when it finally reaches, and all I can do is cry.

Yours,

Will

“Forgive my tardiness, Will, I wanted to cook something for us at my house before I came.”

Hannibal embraced Will at the doorway, a cooler at his feet. Will indulged the physical touch, craved it even, and he invited him in, holding the door for him.

“What did you make?”

“Shogayaki with pork heart. I had prepared the meat in advance, I just needed to finish everything else.” He settled the cooler on top of Will’s kitchen counters, and upon opening it, a stream of heat and alluring smell came out, instead of the expected chill. “It is a simple dish, and will only need to be slightly reheated for our full enjoyment.”

When Hannibal turned, Will was looking at him, a strange, silent look on his face. The whole room was silent, except the buzzing of the fridge. The dogs were nowhere to be seen, probably outside, Hannibal guessed. He met Will’s eyes for a brief moment and smiled, before turning his attention back to the food. Then, without so much as a warning, Will stated something the Alpha did not at all expect.

“I want to have sex with you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal blinked, caught still in the movement of taking the glass containers out of the cooler.

“Is it wise, Will? After such a traumatic event happening to you there is no doubt still shock in your system, doing anything that will stress you out further will only-”

“Please, Hannibal.” The Omega moved to take the items from his hands, and set them on the counter again, and grabbed at Hannibal’s wrists. “I never ask you for anything, but this is all I ask. I want you. I want no one else, I have never wanted anyone else, and I can only have you now, please don’t let me regret asking.”

There was an urgency in his movements, one that suggested Hannibal should follow along, that it was the best option for both of them. So he did.

“I would never dream of it.”

Perhaps he heard the same phantom ticking of the clock in Will’s mind, or was merely spurred on by his words. Whatever it was, Hannibal wasted no time in fulfilling the Omega’s wish, and soon they found themselves tangled in the bed in the living room.

They both kissed fervently, Will’s movements riddled with tremors, but enough surety that it pleased Hannibal. He had been waiting for this side of Will for years and years, and he was finally tasting it without the fever of the man’s heat clouding his senses.

Will undressed them both, his movements growing more confident with each kiss, with each suck and each bite. He descended on Hannibal, took his cock in hand much in the same way he had that night at the Alpha’s house, but this time there were no nerves gripping at him. Only the surety of getting it done, of getting what he wanted to get before the event that would follow. The open wound in his chest gripped at him, sending another wave of phantom pain like a jolt through his body. He shivered.

By the time his jaw was hurting and his scalp was stinging from Hannibal pulling on his hair, Will was so wet that he scarcely needed any preparation. He let Hannibal suck and finger him nevertheless, more for the Alpha's pleasure than his own need. The whole time, he could not take his eyes off Hannibal's face.

When Will finally sank down on his cock and grabbed his shoulders for leverage, there was no grand finality to the action. No music played, no horns blared, not a single atom around them was any different than before. The only thing that changed was that click in Will's head, signalling to him that yes, this was it, this was his fate, his destiny. The path forged for him had brought him here, and he had done it.

He had entered the beast's den, and he was about to get consumed. The fear was gone, replaced by the inevitability of it. The endgame.

He rode Hannibal for what seemed like an eternity, then when his muscles ached he allowed the Alpha to flip them around, and to pound into him relentlessly. Hannibal put a hand on his throat, squeezing each side of it gently, to feel his pulse, to feel the blood coursing through his veins. He fucked him harder. Will took the Alpha's thumb in his mouth and sucked.

He felt Hannibal's knot swell up, encouraged him with his hips to go deeper, pulled and scratched at his back in an attempt to merge them both into one being. Then, Hannibal's hips surged impossibly deeper, popping his swollen knot into Will. The Omega whined, his biology singing, praising him for finally getting his body what it had needed for so long.

The hand on his throat remained there, as if attempting to ground him, to ground them both. Hannibal slumped on top of him, his knot trapping them together in one place.

Feeling the weight of his Alpha on top of him, Will closed his eyes, opened them, and said it.

"I know you are the Ripper."

There was half a moment where Will believed Hannibal was going to caress him, and he almost purred in anticipation. That moment, however, was soon replaced by a wave of dread when the hand around his throat tightened in full-force and crushed his windpipe.

He choked on a breath he attempted to take, which seemed to shake Hannibal from the momentary trance he had fallen into. When the hand let go of his neck as fast as it had gripped it, Will wasted no time in shoving him away, encouraged by whatever had remained of his survival instincts. The action sent a wave of pain down where they had been connected by Hannibal's knot, and judging by the growl from the Alpha, he had felt it too.

Hannibal ended up scrambling up from the bed, and so did Will, both standing on each side of it. No one moved, the same silence as earlier stretching through the house.

“Where are your dogs, Will?” Hannibal asked.

“Not here.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Did you believe I would harm them?”

“No,” Will admitted. “No, I did not. But it was necessary.” Necessary for what, he did not say. Hannibal did not ask.

The Alpha took a deep breath then, and seemed to go somewhere else, in his mind. He walked the few steps around the bed to stand in front of Will, who in turn just stared back at him, and made no move to escape his proximity. Frozen in place, his mind crying to him to run, and taking away his ability to do so at the same time.

Hannibal’s hand came up, but instead of squeezing at his throat again, it landed on his face in a soft touch.

The caress came before the shock could finally register, before he could even begin to think to pull away and stand his ground. And by the time he did, it was too late, the soothing effect of Hannibal’s touch had already made his eyes flutter, almost closed. It was not the fight he had asked for, but he had given up on protesting further.

“Your face is so lovely to look at,” came Hannibal’s voice, just as soft as his fingers on Will’s wet cheek, just as fleeting. “I look and look, and see the skin, the muscle, the bone. And I can never get enough.”

There was a finality in his words. The feeling of throwing in the last card, knowing the game was already finished. Hannibal’s hold on Will’s face tightened minutely, almost indistinguishably, but nothing else changed in the still air of the room. He covered Will’s mouth, not to silence him, but just to touch.

“For years I’d reached with my hand to touch your lips through paper, and now, with you standing before me, I touch them at last, and my fingers get painted crimson red.”

His hand finally slid away from Will’s mouth, and he moved his face closer to his lover’s ear.

”I wondered every day what you must taste like.”

The sick feeling rushed back into Will’s senses, the blood-chilling fear, tamed by the touch of the very man who caused it, screaming at being reminded of the reality of it all.

“This is your chance to find out, then,” whispered Will, not stepping back, his feet glued in place. “Go ahead and find out.”

Suddenly, Hannibal went still, the pieces in his mind falling together at last.

“You were hoping I would kill you.”

The admission hit Will like an arrow, going straight through his bleeding chest and spilling out like venom. Hannibal suddenly looked so pained, so defeated by his own statement, it made Will’s muscles clench, though he could not do him the dishonour of telling him he was wrong.

“I wanted to be close to you one last time, to live the life I created in my head as a boy, aided by your words and your drawings.” Will’s eyes watered anew, spilling over like small waterfalls, he made no move to wipe them. Like blood, his tears dripped down on the floor.

Hannibal’s hand came up once again, desperation rather than finality clinging to it this time. It did not touch will, merely hovered near him.

“You *can* be close to me, Will. This does not have to end the way you have imagined it will.”

“Don’t do this to me, Hannibal!” Will shouted, the sudden rise of his voice filling the room. “Do not offer me your words again, do not lure me into a world that will pretend to bring me joy.”

The all-consuming silence returned. Hannibal stood still, like a statue. Will’s breathing grew wetter and his eyes grew mistier. He was aware of his own nakedness as an afterthought. No amount of clothing would make him feel less bare at that moment. He crossed his arms in front of himself, grabbed at his sides as if for comfort.

"There was a reason I never wanted to meet you. I was so scared of not liking you." he burst into hysterical laughter as his own fingers dug into the meat of his side and pulled. Hannibal felt his pain as his own, let it wash over him, but all he could do was stay silent and listen to the falling stones of Will's love for him.

"I was so scared of you being just another infatuation I had created in my head, and then turning out to be just like the rest of my thoughts. Just echoes of other people. I was dreading the sentence you would say that would turn me against you. I was dreading myself nitpicking at your words.

"When I saw your face and recognised you, I realised that was it. I looked at you and thought, I would inevitably turn you evil in my head. That my world would somehow taint you, ruin the perfect image of you that existed outside of it. And yet it didn't. *I* didn't! And then you stuck around, and I was happy, for the first time.

"For the first time in my life I fell in love with an actual person — outside of letters, outside of text, outside of pretend-courtship, of societal expectations." He paused then, his heaving breaths catching on bits of saliva in his throat. He let himself take a few seconds to level his next words, to make sure their weight stuck to the room properly.

"I fell in love with you, and you turned out to be the worst of all. What does that say about me? Why did I not run away from you, just like I run away from every other mundane person

that I meet — every Alpha, every Beta or Omega, regardless of status, regardless of background. You know Matthew, whom you killed? He was a killer too, he'd killed before he met me. He never told me, but I knew. How could I not?

"You never said that sentence. I'm still waiting for you to say it, so please, please say it. Please turn me away from you. What will my life become if I accept you? What will this mean for me?

"I look at our letters and I imagine the man I was in love with. I try to imagine him with a different face, with a different timber of tone. I try to prove to myself that I was in love with someone who didn't exist, but then you stood in front of me, and you spoke the same sentences, with the same tone, same rhythm as the one in my head. As the one I've always heard.

"I was made for you even before these letters. I think I was always meant for you, and I can't fight that, so please fight it for me. Please say the sentence, and make me hate you. Please."

Hannibal's hands twitched with electricity at his sides. Emotions he'd repressed for years, invested in the patient understanding that one day, one day he would have Will. He would have him as his true self, would accept them both and finally be happy, together with his Alpha. All that had been given to him and taken from him in one single night. The chips had fallen away, making him remember with cold bitterness that every game had two players. Too many chips to hold together.

In the end, Hannibal was the one to step away, forcing a few more meters of space between the Omega and himself. Then, just as shockingly, a string of words stumbled through the Alpha's mouth. He was not entirely sure where they came from, or what their purpose was. For the first time in years Hannibal spoke before he thought.

"I don't know what to say to you, Will."

His voice was just as gentle as it always had been, the sound of it encasing Will one last, sweet time, making him want to close his eyes, to lean forward and fall into the embrace of strong hands he knew would support him. Strong hands that had tried to kill him an hour ago.

Will's entire body shivered, already missing the intimacy he knew he'd inadvertently lost. No, not lost. Sacrificed. For this night had been a sacrifice. To what, he wasn't sure. To pain, perhaps. His closest friend, his dearest comfort.

"Hold me, please," he whispered. "Just for a little while."

And Hannibal did hold him, neither of them noticing their nakedness, neither of them moving an inch. They just breathed each other in, breathed every word and every sentence they had ever written to each other. Every story, every admission, every promise. It all washed over them, encased them like a warm blanket. For a minute or two, they were in a perfect world, surrounded by their perfect words, together at last, in the only way that mattered. Will cried, the sound of it vibrating through Hannibal's bones, and when he stopped crying, he took in the warmth of his Alpha, etched it into every crevice of his brain, trying to make it last

forever. Then, he stepped back, the sadness in his eyes floating away, replaced by the same confidence from earlier that evening.

With the change of his expression, it was as if a bell chimed in the room. Midnight. The ball was over.

With silent steps, Will left the room, left the house, despite it being his own, leaving Hannibal alone there. Hannibal heard the start of an engine, the sound of it growing fainter and fainter.

With one final deep breath, memorising his beloved's scent in the throes of his anger and anguish, Hannibal let two lone tears fall from the corners of both his eyes. His face was tilted forward, so they met at the center of his nose, and became one. Together, they were too heavy to remain on his face, so they fell, splashing down on the rug below.

"Goodbye, Will," he uttered to the house. He took the cooler from the counter, and left, switching all the lights off. As if he was just leaving to go to the store, and when he returned, Will would be there, waiting for him, with open arms.

There was a reason Salome's head was turned away from the platter in some paintings depicting her. Perhaps the artist realised she was never meant to see it, but only enjoy her possession of it.

[April 20XX]

Dear Hannibal,

I was reading a letter of yours from about ten years ago. I'd be worried you would think me creepy, but we know each other too well for me to even think that.

It is so odd, looking at ourselves through the lens of our experiences. We were so different all those years ago, yet all the same throughout. Back then I remember wishing to be saved, now all I wish for is to be left alone.

What do you wish for? You never seem to tell me. I can't decide if it's because you want me to guess, or if you yourself don't know.

I had my first lecture today, the hall was half-full. They put my classes in the second semester, but from next year I'll be full-time. My heart was beating so fast and I was sweating, I was almost afraid the stress would send me into an early heat. The students were nice, one of my coworkers sat in the front row for moral support. It really helped to have her there.

I don't know if you remember, I've mentioned her before. We were on the same team for induction sessions into Quantico, and I later met her again at the mandatory spear training.

She kept her distance from me at first, but in the last few months we've warmed up to each other. She's one of the few people in the building I can stand talking to for more than five minutes, and she treats me like an actual person.

She's an Alpha. She never told me, but I could smell it. God, that sounds so creepy.

I wonder if maybe one day you will walk down the halls of the place I work in. it's an odd and silly thought, and yet I seem to often fixate on it. This job feels permanent to me now, much like your presence in my life does. Part of me wants to mix them together, maybe as an attempt to cement them both.

I tried to picture you as a teacher the other day. You seemed to fit into it naturally. I wonder if it's because I am a teacher now, and I will always view you as an extension of myself. Or, more accurately, a reflection. Is it because every time I read your letters, I am looking at my own hands, rather than yours? I'm not sure.

You are always in my thoughts. I have begun to have full conversations with you there.

Yours,

Will Graham

[December, 20XX]

Dearest Will,

Forgive my late correspondence, your letter seems to have gotten lost in the mail due to another change of address on my part. The current tenant residing in my apartment in Florence was kind enough to forward it to me.

I have missed you so, these past months. Life has been terribly dull without your words to keep me company.

I am glad you have a friend at work. The majority of our life is spent in the workplace, it would be rather torturous to spend that time with individuals we cannot stand.

I myself am in a similar boat. I have grown tired of the life I've built for myself in Italy, and have thus begun seeking something new.

As you know, dear Will, I have previously expressed sorrow in the dullness of my immediate surroundings. I sometimes picture you next to me, while I cut into a patient's flesh, or mend their wounds. you've often expressed your fascination with the dead, we both have. I wonder, however, how you would act upon bearing witness to the living, toeing that line between worlds.

I will not pretend to be solely pleased by the company of another Alpha gracing your presence, when my own is nowhere to be found. By your design, of course. Still, I am grateful you are not alone in your endeavours at the academy.

You would be mistaken to assume you are the only one of the two of us traipsing down the path of past encounters. There are many days where I spend my free time away from the hospital with your letters in hand, pretending the warmth from my fingers etched into the paper is a remnant of your own body heat. You have made me a foolish man, Will Graham. Or perhaps it was you, and all those paintings gracing the Uffizi, dousing me with memorabilia of love.

I shall continue to miss you just as much, and will miss you endlessly until the day comes where I can see your face.

Yours,

Hannibal

—

[Three Years After Hannibal Said Goodbye]

Summers in Baltimore made Hannibal Lecter think wistfully of Florence, of the summers he had lost. He had a passing thought he should go there for a holiday. It passed all too quickly, for he remembered the promise he'd made to himself years ago - that the next time he set foot in Italy, it would be with Will. If bitterness were a garment, Hannibal wore it like a woolen coat. Wrapped it around his shaking shoulders, desperate to stave off the cold. It made him burn up, and he itched all over.

No one had heard from Will since that day. He had vanished into thin air. No one knew where he went, and no one attempted to find out, not even Hannibal. Will was dead to the old world he belonged in, it was as if he never existed.

The FBI did not look for him, either, despite Jack discovering his past relationship to Matthew Brown. The sorrow on the Alpha's face was explanation enough as to why. He felt he owed it to Will, one last attempt at an apology for however many times he had wronged him.

The Chesapeake Ripper had begun ripping again three years ago. He had not stopped. A passive need to sate a hunger had turned into an active desperation to bring back what was lost. All it seemed to bring back, however, was his appetite. Hannibal was hungry all the time, so hungry. He'd tried all of his recipes, tweaked them, created new ones. They all turned to ash in his mouth. None of them smelled right. None of them were warm enough.

It had been a long journey, playing circus with the FBI. Hannibal foolishly thought if he glued himself to the life Will had been leading before him, he'd get him back. If he spread his scent into everything Will had touched and loved, the other man would have no choice but to come back to him.

Patience was a virtue, and Hannibal was rich with it. He reminded himself of that daily, like a mantra, a small reassurance that kept him going. He wished he could remind the universe of it, too, but she'd been awfully quiet for the past few decades.

Years passed. Hannibal stopped counting.

There was a man, somewhere in rural Minnesota. With a well kept beard, speckled with white hairs, and with eyes that held a million stories. People often tried to talk to him, allured by the inviting scent of an Omega, tickled into action by their biology to show this man grace, show him love. But as the years passed, they learned to separate the scent from the man, for all their attempts were little more than empty air that barely touched his soul. They grew used to the idea of his unapproachability. They greeted him, invited him places while already knowing he would refuse, and it was surprisingly easy — they did all the things their biology told them to do, without any of the consequences. The man was a shadow, and they were just rays of the sun, unable to ever reach him.

The man was always alone, no one visited him, but he was always busy doing one thing. He was writing, and writing, and writing. He never seemed to stop. The neighbours began to weave a fairytale of him being a famous author, and on beer nights they would play a game on who could guess his pen name. No one ever did, but then again, they never asked the man for confirmation.

A crinkled envelope was half-shoved under the door. Were Hannibal ten years younger, he would have gotten annoyed and felt his blood boil at the ill treatment of his post. There was a perfectly good post-box, clearly visible from the street, for heaven's sake!

As he were, weathered by countless years and disappointments, Hannibal only had the energy for a single quirked brow. He bent down to pick up the letter with one hand, using the other to wipe some flecks of dirt from the paper. Turning it around with his fingers, he saw only his own address, without a name to accompany it, and no return address listed anywhere.

Ignoring the rattling heartbeat in his chest, Hannibal opened his front door, and made his way to the kitchen. Dinner awaited.

"What's that?" Mr Ajuwon's question interrupted the man's own monologue, snapping Hannibal out of his focus in his patient's words.

"Pardon?" asked Hannibal, though there had been no real reason for the question, other than stalling for time.

The *that* in question was the crumpled green letter, looking so out of place in Hannibal's pristine office.

Hannibal knew John only noticed it, because of his obsessive nature. The Omega, much like Hannibal, was highly sensitive to his surroundings. The first thing the man did whenever he entered Hannibal's office, was to let his wandering eyes discern whether everything was in order, as it was meant to be. If it weren't, he rarely spoke up, but steadily grew more agitated as their session went on. Unnoticed by Hannibal, he had been staring at the envelope almost since their hour started.

Hannibal idly wondered if that exact question was the reason he brought the letter with him to work today. If he was simply looking for a confirmation. For an outsider's reaction to something that in his own mind bordered on the supernatural. That one question took away the last excuse he had to refrain from opening the letter. It did something unspeakable, something painful and bloody and cruel.

It made it real.

"That," Mr Ajuwon all-too-helpfully pointed to the envelope laying on the edge of the desk, in the middle of the office. In the middle of the world. "Do you usually get your mail here?"

“Not usually, no.” Hannibal tried to squint his eyes in a friendly manner, but it bordered on suspicion instead. “I apologise, John. Let me move it before we continue.” Hannibal swiftly got up from the comfort of his seat, and walked to the mahogany desk. Upon depositing the letter in one of the drawers, some of the tension left the room, and he turned to his patient once again, a relieved smile on both their faces. “Shall we continue?”

John nodded and waited for Hannibal to sit back down before he spoke again, counting every step the psychiatrist took with a tap of his foot.

Chopin filled the vast emptiness of the house, the familiar notes adding a false sense of fullness to Hannibal’s aching soul.

He sat near the fireplace, a glass of brandy in one hand, fingers of the other grazing at the edges of the letter. It had been two months since he found it under his front door. He had left it in the living room, then, trying to convince himself he had been too busy to open it right away. That excuse bubbled up each time he went back to it, clasped his hands shut and forced him to look away. It was too painful.

He sawed through human bone, de-skinned arms and thighs, peeled tongues. Cooked, and cooked, and cooked. And created, and orchestrated. And amidst it all, he feared.

He feared that little letter, and the possibilities that lay inside it.

More than once he had convinced himself it was not at all connected to the ugly past. Connected to a love that had disappeared long before his desire to even utter the name of his beloved had. But those attempts were futile.

He had spent years, decades, getting to know one person’s handwriting. It was hard - impossible - to erase that from his mind.

With each sip of brandy, his ears deceived him, and he heard a distant purr. He tried not to pay it any mind. The phantom sound made his teeth ache, his muscles tighten, as they usually did before a chase. But then the purr faded, and the silence returned, together with the crackling of the fire.

He finished his drink, and the moment finally came.

He opened the letter.

Dear Hannibal,

THE END

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